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ISSUE 03 \ FEBRUA 07 \ THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

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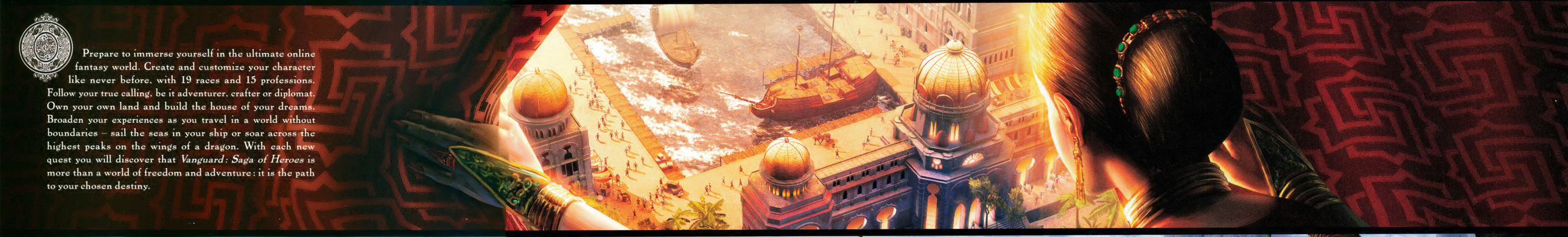

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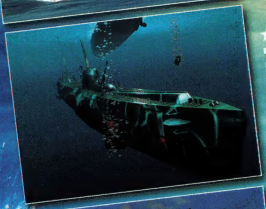

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GALACTIC SCALE

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Alternatively, you could just skim like everybody else

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Do you have any idea how it makes us feel inside when you talk to us this way?

22 **Start**
We love you. No, really. Like, "love" love. Don't believe us? Let us count the ways: previews of *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars*, *Left 4 Dead*, *Savage 2*, *Titan Quest: Immortal Throne*, and *Supreme Commander*. See? You should, like, totally date us now. Also: Game writers speak out on the sorry state of game writing.

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Arkane Studios and Valve are teaming up to make the first truly revolutionary shooter of the 21st century, set in an alternate-universe Paris, France. We sent editor Shawn Elliott to the scene for this exclusive world premiere.

52 **The Freeloader Presents: 101 Free Games**
Our resident penny-pincher clues you in on 101 games that won't cost you a single dime. And we didn't pay him a single dime to write it!

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102 **Tech**
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XTRAS

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"Medieval II" will blow you away..."
– PC Gamer

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"90%" – PC Gamer
"9.25/10" – Game Informer
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"8.8/10" – IGN

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IGN.COM EDITORS' CHOICE AWARD

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TEEN
Alcohol and Tobacco Reference
Blood
Mild Language
Sexual Themes
Violence
Game Experience May Change During Online Play

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The Creative Assembly

TOTAL WAR

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FREE AT LAST!

Or, 101 more reasons not to buy *Jaws Unleashed*

Is there a better word in the English language than "free"? Well, yeah, there are probably a bunch of 'em, but don't argue with me. Certainly, "free" ranks way the heck up there. Which is why I'm always happy when we print our annual "101 Free Games" feature, because getting games for free, like getting anything for free, is better than paying for them. What's always amazing to me is how good many of these free games are. Yes, some of them are just goofy and/or amateurish versions of better, older, or more professional games. But many are far better than you'd think, proving at least a couple of big points: 1) You don't need a million-dollar budget and team of 100 to make a game that people will want to play, and 2) gamers don't need to spend $49.99 a pop to have a good time (or, at least as far as videogames go).

"But, Jeff," you ask, "why run an article on this, when we can just Google it ourselves?" Good question, grasshopper! The reason is that Google, as lovely as it is, has no quality filter. Go ahead and type "free games" into your browser and see what happens. See? You need us. Or, more specifically, for this article, you need The Freeloader, our resident expert on all things free, who worked overtime this month sorting through hundreds of games to bring you this year's definitive list. This is what I keep telling you people: We're merely here to serve you. Your happiness is our reward. The paycheck, acclaim, and adoration of babes everywhere is merely icing on the cake.

And now, if I may switch gears, a little public housekeeping is in order. My heartfelt thanks to the *GFW* gang here for powering through yet another very short cycle to make this issue, and extra-special double thanks to our newest staffer, artiste extraordinaire Rosemary Pinkham, whose happy face has brightened up this office full of cynical gamer dudes (though we'll see how happy she is after a few more months of deadlines like this! Ha-ha!). All I can say is, thank goodness we have a female on staff again. Ryan, you can stop wearing that dress to work now. Please.

Jeff Green
Editor-in-Chief
Games for Windows: The Official Magazine

Now Playing: *DEFCON, Titan Quest, Final Fantasy III* (Nintendo DS), *Viva Piñata* (Xbox 360)
1UP.com Blog: GFWJeff.1UP.com

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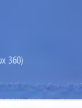
MEET THE STAFF

SEAN MOLLOY
MANAGING EDITOR

Sean was enjoying his pre-*Burning Crusade* self-imposed exile from Azeroth—reading books, piecing quilts, and visiting friends long-neglected. That'll be over soon.
Now Playing: *Supreme Commander, Medieval II, Legend of Zelda: Wii*
1UP.com Blog: GFWSean.1UP.com



DARREN GLADSTONE
SENIOR EDITOR (FEATURES/TECH)

Darren's a mooch of the highest order—no surprises there. Maybe that's why he had no problem joining forces with the fearless Freeloader to assemble "101 Free Games."
Now Playing: *Hellgate: London, World of WarCraft: Legion*, *Puzzle Pirates*
1UP.com Blog: GFWDarren.1UP.com

RYAN SCOTT
EDITOR (TIPS/EXTENDED)

Ryan cannot currently think of anything clever to say, so he's going to say something stupid instead. Ready? Here goes: *World of WarCraft*. See? Now that was stupid.
Now Playing: *EVE Online, Sam & Max Episode 4*
1UP.com Blog: GFWRyan.1UP.com

SHAWN ELLIOTT
EDITOR (STAFF)

Two days with *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars* is never enough. Not when we're now waiting till sometime this summer for its official release.
Now Playing: *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars, Gunny's Mod 1*
1UP.com Blog: GFWShawn.1UP.com

MICHAEL JENNINGS
ART DIRECTOR

Michael's a simple man. That's why he's excited to be part of another edition of "101 Free Games." Because the best things in life really are free, aren't they? Exotic sports cars, fabulous yachts, and reality television starring desperate, washed-up celebrities.
Now Playing: *Company of Heroes*
1UP.com Blog: GFWMichael.1UP.com

ROSEMARY PINKHAM
JUNIOR DESIGNER

Videogames? Who needs 'em? Rosemary spends her spare time doodling crazy bums and crackheads on public transportation. Oh, what fun.

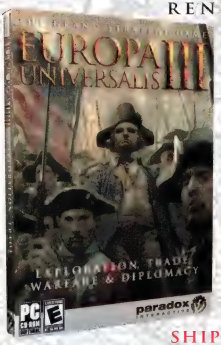
Now Playing: Hot brand-new pink DS
1UP.com Blog: GFWRosie.1UP.com

THE GRAND STRATEGY GAME

COGITO ERGO SUM

(I THINK; THEREFORE I AM)

RENE DESCARTES



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Fans of epic, historical strategy games have been well served by Paradox Interactive's Europa Universalis series – **IGN**

…the depth that made the franchise (Europa Universalis) so great has been expanded to a degree that should impress even the most hardened of Paradox critics - **Wargamer**

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Letters

Random missives from schools, jails, and asylums

LETTER OF THE MONTH

Grand Theft Chariot

I enjoyed your "Play to Pray" article on Christian gaming (*GFW* #3, pg. 44). Speaking as a Christian myself, I often find the Christian culture to be annoying. We are called to be the salt of the earth. We are to engage culture, not avoid it. Instead, we often take secular things and make mediocre, Christian versions of them. A problem with video-games that all gamers are starting to notice is the lack of decision-making. The basic plot is "this person is bad, so we must kill them." This is often not the case in real life; we have to live with people we do not like, and often people are not murderous and evil. We all sin; the question is...what do we do with that sin? God calls us to repent and sent Jesus Christ to die for our sins. We cannot zap people with holy energy and watch them fall to their knees in repentance. The world sees Christianity as lame—because, frankly, Christians are often stale and hypocritical. It's hard to be a Christian gamer because I cannot support many amazing games thanks to the amount of things in them that God does not approve of. I call everyone to make an alternative—not to make a *Grand Theft Auto* clone where the objective is to throw bibles at people and watch as they become saved, instead of throwing Molotov cocktails and watching them explode. Life is precious, and God allows for recreation along with work. As Christians, can we come up with an alternative that rocks...or are we stuck with saying, "Well, at least it isn't secular"?

Jimmy V.

GFW LOVE/HATE

Good job on the seamless transition from *CGW* to *GFW*—it's still the same great mag. I especially appreciate your bringing back the ratings, for the same reason as many other readers: A high rating in a genre I generally skip over usually piques my interest. I hereby authorize you to give yourselves a raise!

Rich Fought

When I saw the magazine on the newsstand, I was amazed...especially when I noticed it was the first issue promoting PC games with the "Games for Windows" logo. I have only one concern, though. Recently, I have only seen a few games bearing the "Games for Windows" logo (mostly Microsoft Game Studios titles and a few other third-party games). Why is this? Are other publishers against the idea?

Robert Bojorquez

"Look, a new PC games mag!" I say to myself as I buy another of those crack-filled coffee drinks. I don't read it till I get home, yet the little coffee drink doesn't even make it past the first garbage can in the parking lot. Two dollars in 10 seconds. Gotta quit.

Now I'm kickin' it in my little smoking room, leafing through *GFW* #1. I turn to Jeff Green's editorial, which tips me off to the fact that this is *Computer Gaming World* in a clever disguise! "These guys?!" I shriek.

Now I'm steamed, as Mr. Green rubs in the fact that I got tricked into buying a *CGW* mag with a new name. "To spite him," I think. "I will read this rag cover to cover, then tell him what I think!"

So now, Jeff Green, I say to you...nice job. Can't say I cared for *CGW*, but that hypnotic symbol of evil shining on the top-left of the cover must've made me love the new mag. I would've already subscribed, but all the little subscription cards that are designed to fall out of the magazine fell out...and I can't find one! Keep up the good work, all. I'll give you guys my money just like the little logo tells me to do!

Anonymous

It's a bit early, but this *has* to be an April Fool's Day joke, right? I mean, what marketing genius would decide to change the name of a magazine that has been known and trusted for decades to something as innocuous and boring as *Games for Windows*? I'm sure you know the percentage of your sales that come from newsstands, but I predict they're going to plummet. For your own sake, change it back!

Nathan

LINUX4LYFE!

As an avid Linux user, I always hoped for platform-neutral gaming coverage from you. Now that you appear to be platform-exclusive, I guess I'll have to see what the other magazines offer for game reviews. I asked for "games," not "Windows games."

Gregory Harris

Seriously, when's the last time you saw us cover Linux? We hate to break it to you, but—as much as we love emulating games in Wine at half the speed—we've *always* focused on Windows as a gaming platform. We just haven't spelled it out on the cover before now.

We crave approval! E-mail gfwletters@ziffdavis.com.

MAIL BYTES

I've always appreciated *CGW*'s honest writeups of overlooked PC games. *GFW*'s debut-issue coverage of *DEFCON* did not go unnoticed. Thank you for uncovering this gem.

Martin A. Mendez

You thought you were clever, didn't you? Slipping those ratings numbers back into the reviews. But it's OK. I only love you a little bit less.

Sean

A great Noogie of Disapproval to your marketers for painting your magazine into a corner. To see what I mean, imagine if your magazine were called *Games for TRS-80: The Official Magazine*.

Torsten Phil

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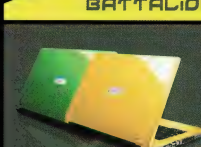

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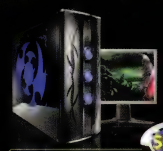

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ENEMY TERRITORY: QUAKE WARS

Evasion of the body snatchers

PUBLISHER **Activision** DEVELOPER **Splash Damage/id** GENRE **Multiplayer First-Person Shooter** RELEASE DATE **Summer**

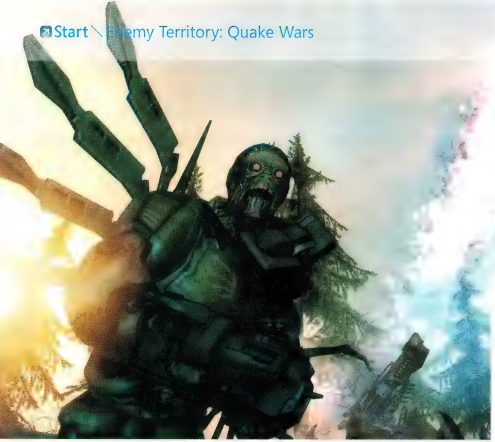
PREVIEW

Jaw with *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars* lead designer Paul Wedgwood, and *Team Fortress* place-names pop up. He says "ramp room," I say "basement" or "spiral" or "bridge" (landmarks tagged for lickety-split tactics chatter), and we smile, because—him in England, me in the States—we somehow grew up in the same spots. (Side note: Wedgwood hypothesizes that Splash Damage might not have developed *Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory* in 2003 had Valve shipped the not-to-be *Team Fortress* sequel it unveiled four years before.) Good game geometry is like that; it exits the other end of experience as lived-in geography. Similarly, if Wedgwood has his way, *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars*' acreage (12 maps total) will expand our spatial awareness this summer.

Yep, you read that right. Summer since positive press at the last (and last ever) Electronic Entertainment Expo afforded Wedgwood and family the platform to ask publisher Activision for an extension. Summer since "done when it's done" is how engine-provider and partner id Software does it. However, if time gives, it takes, too. We talk *Team Fortress* as though it were eons old; DICE fielded its own objective-based tomorrow battle (read: 2142) after *ETQW*'s debut and during its prolonged war-room phase; and, as Wedgwood kids, other developers are already adopting "Wars" as official suffix for FPS franchises slanted RTS (see: Ensemble's *Halo Wars*). I have to ask—will fussy playtesting work as an anti-aging formula?

OPENING SALVO

As multiplayer maps go, Canyon gets the "ta-da!" unveiling. Postcard-pretty, its river carves a channel through steep-sided sandstone and sedimentary rock, big mesas and red-streaked buttes. Power lines and a paved road trace their course across a landscape that seemingly stretches miles and miles...without trickery. Even on a flythrough, it's evident that *ETQW* isn't tiling textures or placing a pattern over multiple surfaces in order to save memory. I wondered about that. Will id's "megatexture" tech, which removes resource restrictions, make a discernible difference—especially when you have no idea what's under the hood? I think so. (For what it's worth, Wedgwood never mentions it as he hop-scotches me across his map's objectives—meaning he's not nudging the observation.) >



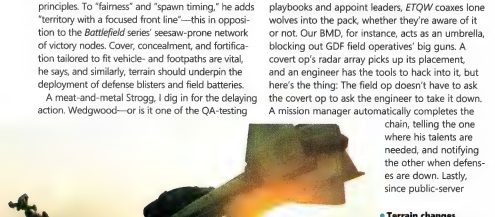
• Player rank is persistent; unlockable arms and abilities aren't—at least not after you leave a server. (The idea is to prevent top dogs from fragging novices with top gear.)

I REANIMATE A STIFF, BOLTING BACK LIKE FRANKENSTEIN'S LIGHTNING-BLASTED MONSTER.

Global Defense Force's goal is the Strogg bioreactor buried in a sheer-walled cliff. To infiltrate the site, GDF troops need first build a bridge, permitting their MCP mobile command post to take a forward position—and later, frazzle the subterranean lab's shields. Secondary objectives, highly helpful though not necessary, entail securing a pair of spawn points situated in a bunker and trashed building. Together, the serial order of operations, elevation twists, and converging trails embody Wedgwood's conviction that primo multiplayer maps must conform to shaping principles. To "fairness" and "spawn timing," he adds "territory with a focused front line"—this in opposition to the *Battlefield* series' seesaw-prone network of victory nodes. Cover, concealment, and fortification tailored to fit vehicle- and footpaths are vital, he says, and similarly, terrain should underpin the deployment of defense blisters and field batteries.

A meat-and-metal Strogg, I dig in for the delaying action. Wedgwood—or is it one of the QA-testing team?—unbuttons an antiarmor turret nearby, while other friendlies set up PsiBlade intelligence and ballistic missile defense stations to track enemy movement and shield the front from GDF fire support. The game deliberately decentralizes command and control. "Success or failure shouldn't sit on a single player's shoulders," Wedgwood says, "so we never put a person in that position." Instead, airdrops are automated, whereas rank-and-file units work together to assemble, maintain, and manage assets.

While league types will nonetheless adhere to playbooks and appoint leaders, *ETQW* coaxes lone wolves into the pack, whether they're aware of it or not. Our BMD, for instance, acts as an umbrella, blocking out GDF field operatives' big guns. A covert op's radar array picks up its placement, and an engineer has the tools to hack into it, but here's the thing: The field op doesn't have to ask the covert op to ask the engineer to take it down. A mission manager automatically completes the chain, telling the one where his talents are needed, and notifying the other when defenses are down. Lastly, since public-server players so often serve only themselves, the system awards points/XP for closing each link.



• Terrain changes dramatically over the course of a map. In Ark, arctic white becomes tropical green as the battle moves into a massive biodome, and in Canyon (shown here), Colorado Plateau turns to *Journey to the Center of the Earth*.

PARTING SHOT

Strogg or man, the difference is more than skin deep. Watching me siphon "stroyent" from human hamburger (Strogg lubricant and lifeblood), Wedgwood says to convert the corpses to spawn hosts. I do, and when I die moments later, I'm able to reanimate a stiff, bolting back like Frankenstein's lightning-blasted monster. We're ornery, we're nasty, we lay low and steer bumblebee bombs into infantry who try to zap them before they blow. We teleport and pop tactical shields. Forum-going know-it-alls will type their fingers down to wet Sharpies trying to prove that one or the other side is overpowered, but you have to hand it to Splash Damage: HQs, character classes, deployables, and ordnance all demonstrate each faction's individuality. I have a few nits, however.

Three things stick out. 1) It's difficult to determine when you're in danger, as well as who, in a world of 1,000 possible deaths, is pulling the trigger. (If all goes well, we won't need to scan onscreen text to work out what ought to be obvious.) 2) Air power isn't powerful—SAM silos and fire-and-forget infantry rockets strip the skill from the kill. 3) It's a bird, it's a plane, it's sprinting faster than a speeding locomotive in a *Battlefield*-sized shooter! Some "va-room" is good for the game—breaking the sound barrier, not so much.

With more than ample opportunity to finesse and future-proof *ETQW* in the months ahead, none of this worries Wedgwood—not when I'm saying "bridge" and "bioreactor" before the game's gone beta. • **Shawn Elliott**

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WHY DO VIDEOGAME STORIES SUCK?

A *GFW* roundtable with some of the best writers in the biz

ROUNDTABLE

Sit through so many boilerplate characters, so much ham-fisted storytelling and stiff dialogue, and the majority of game writing stands out as only slightly better than that of top-quality porno. A-yup, the "emerging art form" of the interactive story is still in its embryonic state, to be sure. Its language is still provisional, its *Citizen Kane* unwritten. We spoke to several prominent game writers to get their thoughts on the art and science of penning videogames. • **Evan Shamoon**

GFW: What obstacles impede quality writing? Put another way, why does 99 percent of it suck?

Frank O'Connor: The only obstacles are the same as in any discipline: habit and talent. The former is, counterintuitively, the hardest to overcome. Thousands of talented writers are floating around out there, but they're probably not writing the next big game. Bluntly speaking, a game—unlike a movie—usually doesn't depend on story. In games, story tends to be a literal afterthought or worse, an awkward obstacle that busy and distracted development teams navigate later on. Ninety-nine percent of game writing, to use your statistic, sucks because it doesn't have to be good.

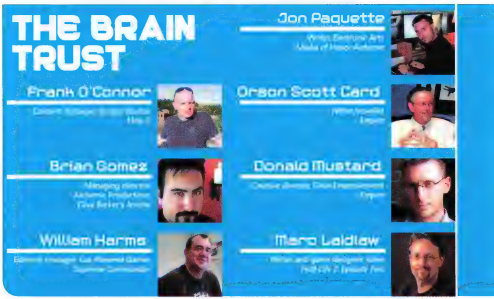
Orson Scott Card: We need to keep in mind that people mean different things by "good writing." If you think "good writing" is oblique, postmodern, obscure, or any of the other virtues too many English professors praise, then I sure hope we never get "good writing" in computer games. But if you mean characterization, relationships, and genuinely witty or at least believable dialogue, then we *are* getting it and always have. Here and there. Now and then.

And it makes a difference in the success of the games. *Maniac Mansion* and *Monkey Island* were brilliantly funny, and players responded. The trouble is that good writing won't save a bad game. Playability comes first. And now, when graphics are terrific, we have to have great graphics, too, or people won't stick around long enough to see whether the writing's good or not. Here's when the writing will get good: when advances in computer technology no longer make a striking visual difference.

ILLUSTRATION BY RYAN YULK

Brian Gomez: Very few development teams would ever consider starting a project without their lead programmer and lead artist, but few producers seem to think twice about starting production without a writer. In many cases, members of the development team handle the writing, and they may not have the skills or experience to craft a strong narrative, to develop characters beyond cookie-cutter archetypes, or to instill their games with a sense of pacing or plot development. Even when professional writers are brought in, they're typically underutilized or brought in far too late. Instead of making them a part of the core creative team, they're a line item on the production schedule to be filled in at a later date, usually long after they can be of much use. In essence, they end up "polishing turds" instead of helping developers craft a cohesive story and world.

Marc Laidlaw: Sturgeon's Law states that 90 percent of everything sucks. I believe there was a later addendum to that, adding nine percent more suckage. Inevitably, in a field this flooded with product, a lot of it is going to be subpar. But at the same time, the increased volume of games has meant it's possible to >



"THE TROUBLE IS THAT GOOD WRITING WON'T SAVE A BAD GAME." - ORSON SCOTT CARD

find plenty of good writing in games. Maybe I filter out the really bad stuff long before I actually bother playing it, but I'm often impressed by the quality of writing in the games I play. Of course, I also appreciate and even treasure a certain brand of objectively bad game writing of the sort often found in games translated from Japanese.

GFW: Does user interaction unavoidably disrupt narrative flow? Should videogames even attempt tightly wrought narrative?

Jon Paquette: Writers have to take off the Aristotelian handcuffs and start to approach writing for games as an opportunity to learn different tools and get to know an audience [that] has much different needs and wants than your average passive TV/movie audience member. Players want to disrupt everything.... When we play, we test the boundaries of the worlds presented to us. The best games turn that "disruption" into satisfying gameplay that brings us deeper into the world of the game. I ride an emotional roller coaster all the time when I play games—but my ride is different than yours, hence the beauty of the experience. As a writer/designer, any time you find yourself saying, "In this part of the game, I want the player to feel 'blank,'" you're setting yourself up to lose the player's interest. Players don't like being force-fed content—we want to discover it.

FO: Glaringly and embarrassingly, games tend to ape movies and jam little ones in between their levels. Partly that's because we're a gaggle of frustrated auteurs, but it's also because we can't think of a better way. Personally speaking, I don't think there's a secret undiscovered method to mesh gameplay with narrative, though.

If we concentrate on innovating new storytelling techniques but neglect simple, good writing, then we'll continue to see clunky dialogue and tough-guy one-liners we thought we'd left behind with Schwarzenegger and Van Damme.

The fact is, a game can have a senseless story, but if the gameplay is fantastic, all is forgiven. And perhaps that's OK. But we wouldn't neglect graphics or audio in our game, and nor should we neglect fiction.

GFW: Are publishers and developers likelier to pay for full-time, talented writers nowadays? Is this even the problem at this point?

William Harms: Over the past couple of years, it's become more of a priority. Gas Powered Games hired me full time to do this, and other places like Valve and BioWare have writers on staff. I think the challenge isn't hiring a writer, it's hiring the correct writer, someone who understands how games work and who appreciates those mechanics.

FO: Yes. I think publishers and developers are smart enough to know that a good story can bring back players, and that means franchises, and franchises mean new BMWs for everyone! That's the cynical view. The realistic view is that game writing is not yet as well-respected as engineering or art disciplines, but it should and will be.

But to your point—money is not the object. The art is the object. It needs to improve and it needs to evolve. We've already seen examples of "real" writers applying fiction to games, and the financial results vary—from Orson Scott Card's lovely but ill-fated *Advent Rising* to Eric Nylund's work on *Gears of War*. And hey, Tom Clancy is the eponymous emperor of writers-who-make-games. He almost certainly has some real input in that stuff, even if it's only from a business perspective.

OSC: The user's actions in a good game do not interrupt the narrative flow—they *are* the narrative flow. The real problem is that cut-scenes interrupt narrative flow. The real art of great game writing is to incorporate important dialogue into action scenes—to have that dialogue going on during the gameplay instead of stopping the action to make the player sit and watch it like a movie.

You only need to stop the player from doing things with his avatar that will remove the avatar from the scene. Think a minute: How many activities do you perform during the day that you do while talking to someone? Hint: Just today, a guy in a sports car rear-ended my rented tank of a car on Hollywood's Beverly Boulevard because he was talking on his cell phone. We can have expository dialogue while characters are in a car driving through a city or while waiting for a meal and watching for bad guys in a dangerous restaurant. If the player is still in danger (just not as much danger) during the dialogue, and is still required to take action (just not as much action) during those scenes, then we will be writing games—not movies that interrupt games.

And when exposition has to be in a lump, then let the player decide when he wants the information. Let the player decide when to interrupt the game to get it. Right now, we force the player to stop when we want him to—he feels power and choice being taken away from him. He loses the thread of the game because we want him to watch our little movie. Let him decide when to take the key voicemail message or e-mail or video (or examine the magic stone or read the scroll or mind-meld with the bird-eating alien monkey) and learn what it has to tell him. And leave him free to interrupt that process whenever he wants.

BG: In my 10 years as a designer and writer, I've been lucky to work with people like Clive Barker, Sam Raimi, Joss Whedon, and others, so I definitely see willingness from publishers to bring in professionals from Hollywood and literature. This is not so much the case on the part of developers where budgets are tight and time dangerously short. I have heard of development teams hiring full-time writers, but that's still quite rare.

I think a bigger part of the problem is the tendency to isolate the writer from the rest of the development team. Professional, working writers are rarely game designers, and vice versa. Forcing these two disciplines to work independently from one another is a recipe for disaster. Writers are great problem solvers because they're forced to find creative solutions to problems of plot, character, pacing, and logic in just

"[WRITERS] END UP POUSHING TURDS INSTEAD OF HELPING DEVELOPERS CRAFT A COHESIVE STORY"

—SWAN LAKE

about everything they write. Those same skills can be very useful to a development team but are all too often underutilized.

GFW: What's the hardest thing about writing for videogames?

WH: On the most basic level, I approach it the same way I do any of my other fiction writing—create compelling characters and place them in dramatic situations. What makes writing for games challenging is the limited amount of space available to you. There is very little time for exposition, and if you use dialogue to deliver the exposition, it needs to sound organic and not forced. Not only does the dialogue need to help move the plot forward, it must also deliver characterization. That's a pretty tight rope to walk.

FO: Working with preexisting designs and scenarios. It's a rare case when the story comes first—that would present problems for the game designers. It has to be collaborative—and, of course, writing by committee is a recipe for disaster. Balance a healthy process of collaboration and you can overcome the hurdles.

BG: There seems to be a feeling in game development that, because it's "just words," it's easy to chop sections of the story, eliminate characters, reorder scenes, et cetera as the schedule or budget dictate. A good story is a complex organism, and arbitrarily removing a single element can have repercussions across the entire thing. Cutting a key scene or character might seem like it's solving a producer's immediate problem, but more often than not, the story suffers or it causes other problems elsewhere that no one but the writer could have predicted.

GFW: Is user-entered, text-driven dialogue a relic of the past?

FO: It's an interesting tool. I remember playing the first adventure game with what seemed like an intuitive parser—*The Pawn* on the Atari ST. It would hardly pass the Turing Test, but at least it didn't answer every interaction with, "You can't do that here." Interacting with a computer in a natural way works, but I think speech is a better medium for that—although *Mass Effect* [on the Xbox 360] is doing intriguing stuff with multiple-choice responses. But give the player infinite choices and input, and he'll break a story very quickly—like a heckler at a play.

BG: Typed-input and text-parsing adventure games were entertaining in their day, but I don't think games like *Oblivion* would have been better if players had been able to type in their own dialogue—just look at the player chat that pops up in the typical *World of WarCraft* or *Battlefield 2* session, and I'm sure you'd agree. I'm far more interested in the use of voice commands; voice-recognition technology is getting better every day, and I think we're going to see a lot more of it in games, especially as the technology for evaluating stress level and emotional states gets better.

OSC: Text-driven dialogue is a dead end precisely because computers do not understand human language and never will. Computers don't "understand" language—they recognize codes they've been programmed to respond to. The person who learns a language is the player. You aren't typing English to your computer; you're learning Computerese and typing in statements in that foreign language. What's fun about that? Typing in verbal commands—or even speaking them into a voice-recognition system—is a constant reminder that the player is not in control, because he can't just say anything and get a meaningful response from the computer. Why burden the player with a tedious task that also breaks the flow of gameplay and reminds him of his powerlessness?

ML: It may be one of those reservoirs of archaic genetic material, currently insulated from the rest of the industry, waiting to be tapped by future generations of Heirloom Storygame Farmers.

GFW: How well are Hollywood and the gaming industry working together?

BG: Anyone in the business of creating and marketing intellectual property needs to take games very seriously. Videogames are a permanent part of our culture, and as our future writers, directors, and entertainers grow up with game controllers in their hands, it is only natural that these same people will want to branch out and explore games as a medium for expressing their creativity.

ML: I don't find this to be a very interesting area at all, whether it succeeds or fails. Games are interesting to me on a creative level, because there are still fundamental challenges being solved...an endless succession of new problems. It's been a long time since movies were in this zone. However, I don't think movies are going to suddenly get fresher by trying to skim off some of the excitement attached to games. The opposite happens. They just look more pathetic. I respect movies that are purely cinematic, not pretending to "hang wit da noo kids."

FO: We've signed an agreement with Peter Jackson and Fran Walsh with WETA Interactive. Together, we're planning to shake the storytelling and videogame industries to their very cores! Or at least have fun in a creative collaborative process and try to make all the innovations and evolutions I promised actually happen. And, again, tell really cool stories.

GFW: What are the best bits of media—games, Web, machinima, whatever—that you've come across recently?

Donald Mustard: *Lost* is the single greatest entertainment experience ever and has had the biggest impact on my work over the past two years. What J.J. Abrams has done on that television show is incredible—the way that they've developed characters, moved the plot along, and tied it all together. Within a huge story arc, they have hundreds of little sub-arcs that are all weaving together, and I think that is so applicable to designing games. I think we get caught up in saying, "Let's take 20 hours to pace our first-person shooter," when we should be saying, "Let's figure out the 20-hour arc along with several sub-arcs." For every four or five hours of gameplay, you should be getting big moments and revelations.

WH: I absolutely loved Cormac McCarthy's new novel, *The Road*. He says more with one sentence than most writers say with 10, and that's something I definitely try to learn from, especially because of the brevity inherent to game writing. In terms of games, I can't wait to play the new *Splinter Cell*. I love the idea of moral ambiguity in games, and I want to see how they handle it.

ML: McCarthy's *The Road*. *Phoenix Wright* on Nintendo's DS.

GFW: Are there tools that would suit the very specific art of game writing better than, say, Microsoft Word does?

OSC: Microsoft Word doesn't suit any writing purpose. Real writers use software that doesn't dictate to them; they use software that gives them more choices and control. I write novels (in fact, everything except screenplays) in WordPerfect, a true writers' word-processing program. MS Word is for people who enjoy being in slavery to a really dumb overseer.

The resources I actually need—besides the word processor of my choice—are the ones the game creators provide me. Give me visuals! Show me the levels! Let me see the world we're moving through! Ideally, during the early creative stages, the writer would come up with scenes he'd like to show and the artists would sketch them out—creatively adding cool stuff that would be fun to play with.

ML: I go through a lot of steno pads. ●

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BEYOND AZEROTH...

TEEN
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Suggestive Themes
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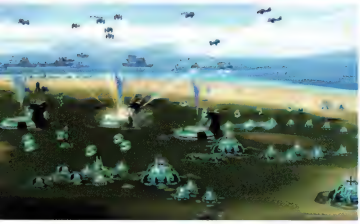
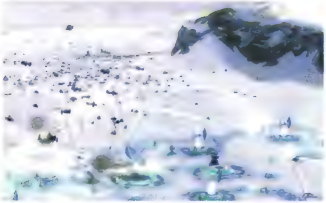
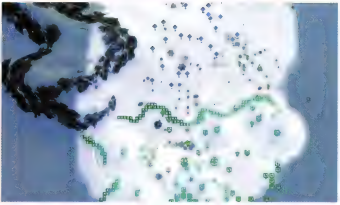


• Queue up complicated maneuvers and build huge, complex bases.





• *Supreme Commander's* battles are detailed, chaotic, huge, and fun to watch (left), but I found myself playing mostly from a satellite's-eye perspective (right).

SUPREME COMMANDER

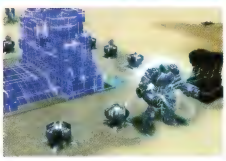
The existential interface question

PUBLISHER: **THQ** DEVELOPER: **Gas Powered Games** GENRE: **Real-Time Strategy** RELEASE DATE: **February 2007**

EXCLUSIVE PREVIEW

Down by the beach, destroyers pound naval construction yards with missiles, disrupting a crisscrossing loom of light that will, given a few seconds more, weave itself into a radar-jamming cruiser. Gunships lift off the sand and hover, kicking up clouds of silica in their wake, prepping to storm a hydrocarbon energy plant. A swarm of bombers circles like vultures, while a giant mech (the "Supreme Commander" itself) and a wedge of escort submarines wade beneath the shimmering waves, half-visible through the rippling distortion—beautifully detailed stuff, but I'm staring at green dots, red triangles, and blue half-circles.

Playing around with an early version of Gas Powered Games' RTS *Supreme Commander* exposes a bizarre, unexpected existential dilemma: Can a user interface be *too* useful? Certainly *SupCom*'s UI allows you an unprecedented amount of control—pull in tight to check out the details on your missile launchers and smoke trails, or take a satellite's-eye-view (just spin the scroll wheel) of the entire theater and follow your units as icons—dots, more or less—on an interactive megamap. *Supreme Commander*'s scale pits a thousand units against one another, and processing the game's multiple battlefronts while also managing its multiple bases is simply *far, far easier* when eyeballed from outer space. Strategies become clearer, objectives are more obvious, and armies are more manageable. The game is rendering Armageddon in painstaking detail, but I'm too preoccupied with the Atari 2600 version to notice.



Very important Personoid: Lose your commander, lose the war.

THE BEST-LAID PLANS

Just when you think some other RTS has thought of everything, *SupCom* seems to have thought up some more. The right side of your screen contains a simple, graceful collection of dynamic buttons for selecting engineers and groups of units (assigned in the traditional Control-Number way)—when an engineer finishes a construction, reclamation, or repair task, it appears as a button on the right. If the engineer's busy, the button simply disappears out of sight and out of mind. Transport flyers can set down "landing beacons" that allow you to shuttle entire armies from Point A to Point B in multiple runs with no supervision—just move a group of units to a beacon, and shuttles will automatically load, transport, unload, and repeat until the entire group makes it to the other side. The game's shrewd queue system lets you line up dozens of building instructions and preplan complicated base layouts while you leave the builders alone—drag a line of power stations, form a square of mass converters, set up a trip to a far-off island to install a complex sonar array, and turn your gaze away. It's micromanagement, yes—but it frees you up for large-scale macromanagement.

Like Gas Powered founder Chris Taylor's landmark *Total Annihilation*, players need only manage mass and energy, and once a mass extractor or power station is constructed, there's no additional upkeep costs, depletion risks, or harvester units to manage. And just like *Total Annihilation*, the game encourages producing units by the hundreds, expendable and 100-percent replaceable.

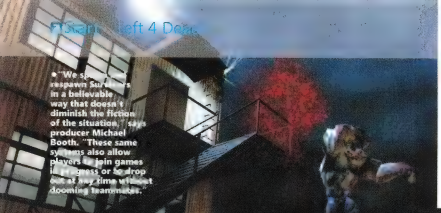
Slide the interface to any side you want (or to another monitor entirely, if you've got the setup).

PROPAGANDA AND THE SEEDS OF SELF-DOUBT

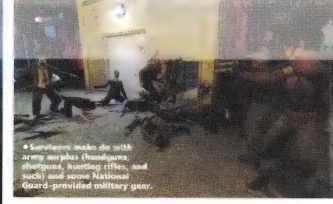
Supreme Commander's UEF campaign ("the blue team," and one of *SupCom*'s three warring sides) follows familiar multifaction RTS structure. Talking heads in military regalia bark orders, parrot advice ("Having trouble with that base, soldier? Try a different unit combination!"), and repeatedly question your manhood. Meanwhile, agents of the Cybran (faction two, half-robot humans looking for Cylon-style freedom and/or revenge) and Aeon Illuminate (faction three, hypnotic New Age mystics who follow "The Way" and preach inner peace via external violence) take turns sowing seeds of doubt even as you wear down their shield generators—you can only be called a fascist so many times before you begin to believe it. The concept is high-tech, but the execution is grounded: There's talk of interstellar warp gates, and each mission takes place on a new planet, but the forests, tundra regions, and island chains look remarkably like modern-day Earth—and the three sides' units don't spin too far off into the extradimensionally odd.

As you achieve objectives in each map (recover the recently killed captain's black box, send a convoy to a "safe" scientific outpost), a computer voice announces that your theater of operations has expanded, and suddenly the playing field doubles (or more) in size, revealing new islands or valleys—and making your previously impressive base feel suddenly, embarrassingly inadequate. A single mission goes through three or four such theater expansions—more room for my dots, triangles, and semicircles to shuffle, replicate, and disappear. **Sean Molloy**

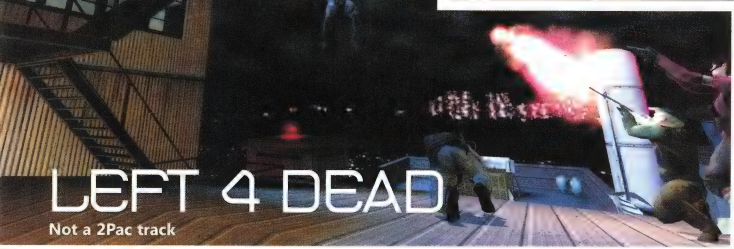
SUPREME COMMANDER EXPOSES AN UNEXPECTED DILEMMA: CAN A USER INTERFACE BE *TOO* USEFUL?



• "We s… respawn Sp… in a believable way that doesn't diminish the fiction of the situation," says producer Michael Booth. "These same systems also allow players to join games in progress or to drop out at any time without dooming teammates."



• Survivors make do with army surplus (handguns, shotguns, hunting rifles, and such) and some National Guard–provided military gear.



LEFT 4 DEAD

Not a 2Pac track

PUBLISHER: **Valve Software** DEVELOPER: **Turtle Rock** GENRE: **Survival-Horror** RELEASE DATE: **Spring**

PREVIEW

No diagnosis needed—life's a lie, and death is definite. No vaccines, no antiviral agents, no undoing the undying. Got chewed? Get chewing—because nobody begs "do me now" in *Left 4 Dead*, not when one of four faces of undeath lets online losers lash out with a 40-foot tongue.

"The germ of a co-op game centered on surviving a zombie epidemic evolved out of a playtest experiment we conducted with *Counter-Strike: Condition Zero* bots back in 2003," says producer Michael Booth. "We found that a few counter-terrorists armed to the teeth against 20 to 30 slash-and-stab terrorists was a hell of a lot of fun." The genre jump from headline-grabber to zombie-horror was obvious, he says, merely an "a-ha!" moment preceding an R&D phase concerned with shaping co-op mechanisms for the "Survivor" team and procedurally generating a brain-hungry, though far from brain-dead, "Infected" population. According to Booth, "Although gamers take an A.I.'s ability to walk, run, crawl, jump, or climb from Point A to Point B for granted, the coding can be complicated. A mob of Infected isn't so intimidating if it sticks on a truck and stops moving. So we're enhancing our A.I. navigation to ensure that the neck-biters not only go everywhere the Survivors go, but that they get there in fast and fluid fashion by leaping, scaling, loping—whatever an enraged person would do in a similar situation to reach the object of his anger."

Once defiled, players determine the variety of bogeyman they devolve into and taste tit-for-tat vengeance by bird-dogging onetime teammates who didn't defend them. Smokers disintegrate in blinding billows when downed, and lasso prey with long prehensile tongues. ("If he's high above, his tongue acts as a hangman's noose," Booth says.) Tanks—gorilla-huge masses of hate and muscle—pulverize walls and hurl wrecks; Hunters leap from building to building, shoving Survivors off ledges before lunging in; and Boomers projectile-vomit a pheromone that baits nearby Infected.

Better off dead? Maybe, but definitely more fun for it. • **Shawn Elliott**

> NO VACCINES. NO ANTIVIRAL AGENTS. NO UNDOING THE UNDYING.

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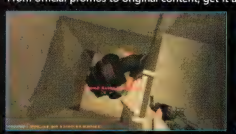
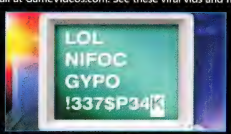


COUNTER-STRIKE CLUCKS
Guy goes ballistic when a pair of counterterrorist pranksters blocks his escape.



LEETSPEAK EXPLAINED
Fear-prone parents, take note: network news anchors demystify "dangerous" leetspeak.

HOP-AND-BOP HAMSTER
Real-life hamster replaces the mole in Commodore 64 platformer *Monty on the Run*.

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PLAY FOR PAY

Is professional videogaming a viable career path?

CULTURE

Over the next three years, David Walsh, aka "Walshy," will make at least $250,000 playing videogames. A recent addition to Major League Gaming's competitive roster, Walshy also stands to make an additional $10,000 per tournament win, not to mention extra cash through product endorsement. Barely in his twenties, Walshy brags that he now makes more money than his parents.

Nice work—if you can get it. But for most videogamers, becoming a tournament player is about as likely as joining the NBA's Los Angeles Lakers. Nevertheless, thousands of people do make a living—or at least some spare cash—playing videogames. If you're serious about play for pay, there's probably a way to make it happen.

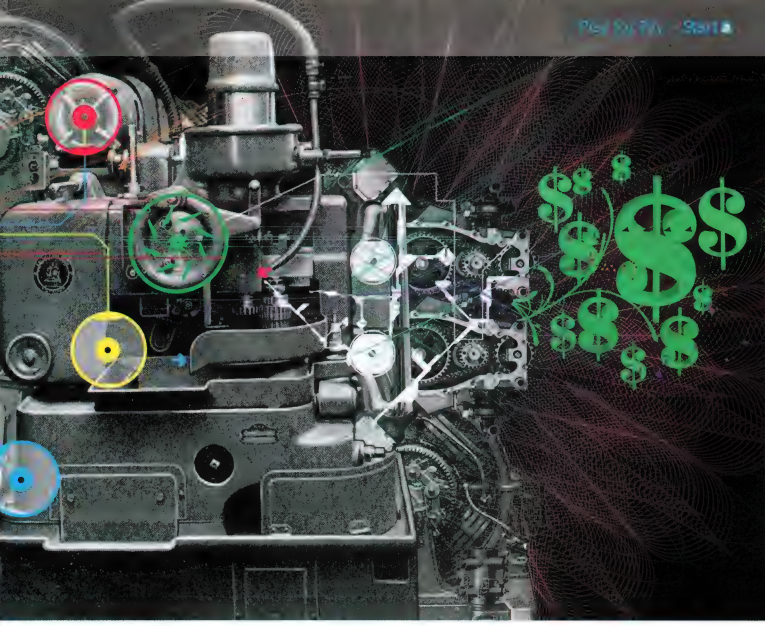
But it turns out that the really big money in play for pay isn't in tournament competition. Independent gaming consultants who advise game companies on a game's market potential can earn upwards of $200,000 a year. And while they do spend time meeting with game-company executives, independent consultants—by the nature of their work—spend much of their time playing unreleased games. "It's a lot more fun helping game companies make their games better than grousing about them after they've been released," says Mike Salmon, partner and cofounder of the Big Solutions Group, a leading game-consulting group.

Unfortunately, the only way to become an independent game consultant is to first become a respected game reviewer for a national media outlet. That's going to require something more than just a steady hand at the joystick. "You have to not only be a strong gamer but also have a feeling for what consumers want, and be able to write entertaining prose," says Tom Russo, editorial director at the G4 network, which subcontracts reviews to freelance writers. If you make the grade, the pay's not bad. Russo claims that reviewers for G4 can earn up to $120,000 a year. Meanwhile, staff writers for game magazines can earn salaries ranging anywhere from around $30,000 to $80,000 a year depending on experience and the publication.

An alternative is writing strategy guides. The pay is adequate—around a $10,000 flat fee for a two-month project, which includes both gaming and writing. However, there's an undeniable glory to being the gamer who literally "wrote the book" about a hit game. "What could be a better way to prove that you're the ultimate gamer?" points out Steve Escalante, marketing manager for BradyGames, a strategy-guide publisher.

Not much of a writer? Another potential source of income is trading objects inside an

ILLUSTRATION BY ALEJANDRO CHAVETA WWW.ILUSTRADO.COM



MMO. Anybody with patience and an index finger can join an MMO and level up a character until it can collect virtual items that can be sold to other gamers for real-world cash. The challenge here is that, like day-laboring, the pay sucks. You might spend all day killing your 200th megaboss only to get an object that's worth a few pennies on the open market.

Of course, there's always cyber-hooking. Considering that a large segment of the videogaming community is male, it's no surprise that leather-clad, dirty-talking, big-breasted avatars are in demand. The pay runs about $3 an hour per client, which can really add up if you're able to type fast enough to keep multiple clients "occupied" at the same time. On the other hand, when you considered playing for pay, this might not have been the kind of "play" that you originally had in mind.

If you're serious about making real money in an MMO, the only way to go is to buy low and sell high. The trick here is to know more about the value of virtual items than the slug-festing day laborers. The money that can be made this way isn't to be sneezed at. A 17-year-old trader with the handle "Ogulak Da Basher" recently earned a college fund of $35,000 trading inside *Entropia Universe* over a three-year period.

None of the above appeal to you? Well, you might find a couple of fringe jobs more your cup of tea. Machinimists who produce videos using computer games have been paid as much as $10,000 for a single project, according to Ingrid Moon, program director for Machinima.com. The challenge here is that for every paid machinimist, there a thousand amateurs doing similar work for free. "There's money to be had," says Moon, "but only for the best of the best."

You might also become a demo dolly, like Morgan Romine, aka Rhoulette, who represents Ubisoft at gaming events as a member of the Frag Dolls demonstration team. "We play games all the time, we obsess about games in forums and blogs, and we hang out with other gamers at live events—so we're essentially professional game geeks," she says. According to Ubisoft, a Frag Doll can earn as much as $35,000 a year, depending on how much she writes and how many events she's willing to attend. The only limitation here is that this career path is pretty much closed to gamers who couldn't also be lingerie models.

In short, it's possible to play for pay even if you're not tournament grade. The one hitch is, unless you have some complementary skill, like writing talent, sales experience, or the ability to look hot in a tight T-shirt, you'd best keep your day job. ● **Geoffrey James**

YOU MIGHT ALSO BECOME A DEMO DOLLY—THE ONLY LIMITATION HERE IS THAT THIS CAREER PATH IS PRETTY MUCH CLOSED TO GAMERS WHO COULDN'T ALSO BE LINGERIE MODELS.

Capture a scar, expend your collected souls, and sacrifice your unit to become a hyperpowerful Hellborn for a short time.

Humans can build pricey siege weapons—battering rams and steambuchets"—to take down Beast Horde structures.

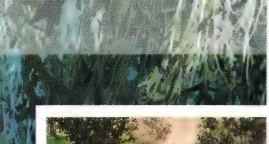
Commander's-eye view: Build a garrison, and you can spawn other towers and substructures next to it to cultivate minibases.

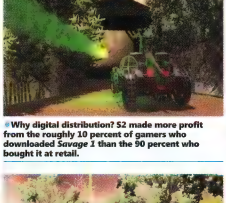
Rock-paper-scissors: Block a quick attack to stun the attacker; strong attack a block to stun the blocker; quick-attack a strong attack to stun the stronger.

SAVAGE 2: A TORTURED SOUL

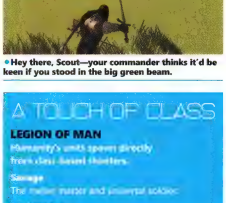
Lessons from the wolves

PUBLISHER: **S2 Games** DEVELOPER: **S2 Games** GENRE: **Real-Time Strategy/First-Person Shooter** RELEASE DATE: **Spring 2007**





Why digital distribution? S2 made more profit from the roughly 10 percent of gamers who downloaded *Savage 1* than the 90 percent who bought it at retail.



Hey there, Scout—your commander thinks it'd be keen if you stood in the big green beam.

A TOUCH OF CLASS
LEGION OF MAN
Humanity's units spawn directly from class-based theaters.
Savage
The melee master and universal soldier.
Legionnaire
The heavy fighter that wields a rocket launcher.
Builder
Constructs buildings, ammo depots, shield generators.
Scout
Sneak, snipe, and survey.
Chaplain
A priest of medic of any other name.
BEAST HORDE
The "Horde" in this faction's name isn't the only reason you're thinking WOW.
Conjurer
Make foes wither and buildings grow.
Shape-Shifter
Burrow in the dirt or disguise yourself as the enemy.
Summoner
Summons pets to do your bidding.
Predator
Sharper claws for better bleeding.
Shaman
Crowd-control spells and healing also.

EXCLUSIVE PREVIEW

When is a garage not a garage? When it's laid out like a 2-bedroom apartment and sits one floor above a massage parlor in a menthol-scented office park. That's where the six-man crew of S2 Games toils away at *Savage 2*. Call it an online multiplayer RTS/FPS with RPG elements; call it a labor of love.

Time has filed 2003's *Savage* under "online novelty": interesting idea (an RTS where all the units are real, networked, class-based-FPS players), imperfect execution. And so S2 is treating *Savage 2* as the game that its precursor probably should have been. It's thematically and conceptually identical, but it's built on the kind of feedback that only comes from throwing a game to the wolves for a couple of years.

Among the dozens of lessons S2 learned: An online game is only as good as its players—so god help ya if those players are obnoxious asses. *Savage 2* answers with a karma system meant to foster peace and harmony even as its savage men and shamanistic beasts wage war. Do good deeds and they go on your permanent record, tied to your account and on display to everyone. Revel in jackassery (team kills and the like), and the game automatically docks you. "Where there's a will, there's a way" applies to griefing, too, so players can slam peers with negative karma for shenanigans the A.I. can't track—at a fractional cost to the inquisitor's own karma.

Savage 2 also awards and tracks experience points to keep tabs on how a player performs in the game's various roles—so you can hunt for a medic who knows his class to round out your clan or make sure your team's commander actually has some notion of how RTS games work before you hand him the reins.

As in the original *Savage*, each team has a designated commander who pilots his comrades and plops down structures from a top-down, RTS-style view—when the commander gives a unit a move order, a great green beam of light shoots down from the heavens on the unit player's screen, showing him where he's wanted. And while the original game's commander spent most of his time micromanaging tech trees and too little monitoring battlefield activity, *S2* flattens the tech tree and aims to redirect commanders' focus toward hands-on battle strats—placing buildings, ordering units to the next front, doling out buffs and debuffs during combat, and scribbling tactics on the minimap like a nu-medieval John Madden. Commanders also manage *Savage 2*'s new upkeep system—every garrison, siege workshop, monastery, and cannon tower you build now has an associated constant resource drain. The point? To keep players on the move, constantly relocating and advancing instead of simply sprawling—and to prevent the 4-hour matches that plagued the original when a clearly superior side simply couldn't take down the enemy's last bastion.

Down on the field, each class (five per side taking familiar melee/sniper/sneaker/medic/builder roles, plus special expensive siege and tide-turning titan units) starts off with four RPG-ish "special abilities," so combat plays out a bit like that of *WOW* or *Guild Wars*—only here, damage is determined by proper aim rather than a random die roll. Long-range weapons fire from the familiar first-person view, but melee battles are handled from a third-person view, with a cone-shaped "damage zone" to compensate for lag-based inaccuracy. Players earn in-game experience (unrelated to the persistent account XP) that they can apply to stats for the duration of the game—your commander doles out team XP, too, buffing health, attack strength, mana regeneration, and other stats to suit the collective play style.

Field players can get in on the higher-level strategizing. For every five on the field, one can be elected officer to captain a minisquad, placing roving spawn points for his direct reports and supplying a healing aura to promote squads sticking together. Officers even get their own minicommander view to help with microstrategizing. Builder units can also construct structures on the field if they spot a hole in the commander's expansion plan, or repair decrepit buildings themselves if the team can't afford the upkeep.

The original *Savage*'s only allied NPCs were peons who automatically carted gold from mines to supply depots—a paean to *WarCraft* that was merely meant as a visual representation of an automated act. But it didn't take long for *Savage* players to realize they could form a supply line themselves and work the resource chain much more efficiently...an unexpected and, in S2's eyes, completely undesired outcome. To prevent players from becoming mining mules, peons are now entirely out of the picture, mines operate simply by existing, and *Savage 2* adds a second resource culled directly from combat: souls attained by slaying enemy units. Accumulate enough of these, stand on a strategically placed scar in the earth, and you'll sacrifice yourself to summon and temporarily take control of one of *Savage 2*'s new marauding Hellborn units—a nuker or brawler balanced for turning tables, not frequent fighting.

While the original *Savage* seemed slightly avant-garde when it was first revealed, hybridization is now the norm—and what was once *Savage*'s claim to fame is now fairly commonplace. So rather than relying on novelty to make their name, S2 is hanging its hat on digital distribution, skipping the publishers and doing it all themselves (though they haven't ruled out Steam). Pass the full version around for free (fully playable via LAN, time-limited on S2's servers), then pay $29.99 if you want to make a persistent account online and participate in the ladders, clans, and stat-tracking services. A sophisticated shareware system, really—and a sign that garage game development still exists somewhere outside the garages. **Sean Molloy**

GLADSTONED

The Year of the Dork

Column

It's 2007 already? It seems like only yesterday I was playing *Planescape: Torment* until about crazy o'clock—yup, just me and my trusty ol' 1GHz PC. Used to call her Bessie, I did.

Actually, that *was* yesterday. Getting my hands dirty with Windows Vista, I've been testing all sorts of games—new and old—from the cavernous *GFW* library. A little misty-eyed with nostalgia and a little optimistic about things to come—that's kinda what happens around January anyhow, right? A new year, a new OS, a new crop of titles sporting dynamic water physics models with hyperrealistic lighting...(holy crap...I just don't care anymore! Didn't the Wii teach us that cutting-edge graphics do not equal good gameplay?).

Well, after checking the Outlook calendar, it tells me that 2007 is the Year of the Dork. Hey, who am I to argue with my contact manager? You know what that means. It's time for yet another useless list from yet another useless person—and my New Year's resolutions are of 2560x1600 proportions. Yeah, I just cracked a stupid joke about my monitor. Sue me.

Resolution No. 1: I will contain my rage and not break steering wheels, gamepads, keyboards, mice, desk drawers, chairs, or any other inorganic objects that stand in my path while playing a game. At least for the first hour.

> IT'S TIME FOR ANOTHER USELESS LIST FROM ANOTHER USELESS PERSON.

Resolution No. 23: If I take a notebook computer on my honeymoon next month, it will not come loaded with any games and I will not ruin the trip by logging in to *World of WarCraft* even once. It doesn't count if I sneak in some *Elite Beat Agents* time on my DS after she's asleep, right?

Resolution No. 56: *Crusader: No Remorse* will work on a Windows PC before this year is out. Anybody got the phone numbers for people who worked on that game? Mr. Zurovec? You out there?

Resolution No. 74: This year we can beat Game Lock together. Every year, this silent killer rips apart thousands of relationships and causes insomnia. But there is a cure. You, game developers, need to build in more save points so we won't feel compelled to play "just one more level before I go to bed."

Resolution No. 82: I will have one play session of *Dark Messiah of Might and Magic* that doesn't end in the PC version of a four-car collision.

Resolution No. 87: I promise that I will not let myself get baited by forum haters that think everything is a conspiracy. I'm not saying Lee Harvey acted alone, but for the last times—if I like game X, I am not paid by the game publisher to say nice things. My pathetically empty wallet attests to that. However, that doesn't mean I'm above going on the boards with an alter ego, busting on said douchebags or just being a garden-variety jerk.

Resolution No. 98: I will try to not get angry at bloggers masquerading as journalists. That's right, I'm talking about irresponsible reporters who don't fact-check plagiarized pabulum reposted from fan-boy forums only to pass it off as fact. Then, when people call these bloggers on their BS, these jerks post half-assed retractions without properly acknowledging their own screwups...crap...this is the third year in a row I've blown this resolution. Maybe I'll have better luck in 2008. ●

BEAT THE GEEK, REDUX

A few months ago, I presented a challenge. Come up with one great question to confound even the most hardcore gamer. Time was the one that stumped the stalwarts.

What game's music featured in a 1984 Commodore 64 game, was later used for a popular techno song played in sports arenas and then remixed into a gothic industrial song?

Before you lose any sleep, I'll just tell you that the answer was Lara Jones. Oh, and the techno song was "Kernkraft 400," performed by a group called Zombie Nation. Congrats, Aaron Cole, you're King Nerd!

Darren Gladstone

What gaming resolutions do you plan to make—and try to keep—this year? Keep tabs on Darren's by e-mailing darren_gladstone@ziffdavis.com.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE UGLY: FEBRUARY 2007

High noon in PC gaming's Wild West (which, apparently, is *Ultima Online* this month)

THE GOOD

UO GETS A MAKEOVER

Publisher EA's next *Ultima Online* expansion, *Kingdom Reborn*, finally brings the 10-year-old MMO out of the Stone Age...and into the Bronze Age! The game's new 3D graphics engine gives it a sort of *Diablo*-ish look, and the improved user interface implements modern conventions like skill bars. *Kingdom Reborn* launches next spring; players can stick with the original 2D client, though the plan is to eventually phase it out entirely.

THE BAD

UO TRIES TO BE *WOW*

Like many other MMOs, *UO* badly wants to be like *World of WarCraft*, as evidenced by all the quests, sparkly loot, and PVP-shy gameplay EA continues to push, despite pleas from frustrated old-schoolers. Here's some advice for anyone who's not Blizzard: Don't try to emulate *WOW*, because it's already perfected what it does...and Blizzard ain't sharing the pie. Plenty of untapped angles are out there for clever MMO designers to embrace—go find 'em.

THE UGLY

EA TO FANS: "STOP MAKING *UO* BETTER THAN WE DO!"

Disenfranchised players turn to fan-run servers to relive what once made *UO* so enjoyable to them. Retro *UO* shards like Hybrid (www.uogamers.com) maintain a healthy population that digs unmoderated PVP and rapid character development...but not for long, according to *UO* producer Aaron Cohen: "EA is looking closely into the issue and takes intellectual property issues very seriously."

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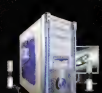

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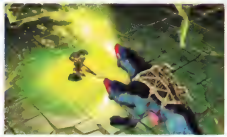
XTRAS

To Boston and Hades and back again: Read all about Jeff Green's personal quest to visit Iron Lore at GFWU3.1UP.com. Sorry, no free loot.

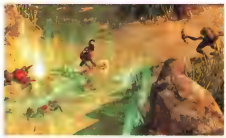
1UP NETWORK

Titan Quest: Immortal Throne takes place in the Greek mythological underworld of Hades. Here you do battle in Styx against a group of troglodytes.

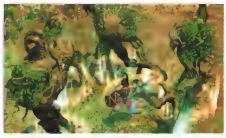
All new monsters await you as you venture further into the depths of Hades. That flame-shooting bad boy is called a Siege Strider. Kick him in the shins!



Fighting Cerberus in Hades' Tower of Judgment.



He's ugly and green and firing at you. Kill him.



Hey, didn't Treebeard tell you guys to be nice?

TITAN QUEST: IMMORTAL THRONE

Hands-on info dump: more killing and shopping

PUBLISHER: **THQ** DEVELOPER: **Iron Lore** GENRE: **Action Role-Playing Game** RELEASE DATE: **Spring 2007**

PREVIEW

If you're not setting out to create the most original game in the world, you'd better have a lot of other tricks up your sleeve. Such was the case with Iron Lore Entertainment, which took on *Diablo II* with a monster-killing clickfest of its own, *Titan Quest*—but did so with a cool setting, beautiful environments, an array of bizarre creatures, and a compelling and dynamic skill system that constantly presented you with interesting choices and challenges. It was, at root, a textbook case in great game design, which is why it rose above virtually every other *Diablo* wannabe that ever preceded it, and why it has held up as one of the best PC games of 2006.

Now Iron Lore is quickly following up with *Titan Quest: Immortal Throne*, an expansion that adds... well, pretty much exactly what you would expect from an expansion: more of everything. We braved the winter cold to travel to the company's offices in Waltham, MA to get some hands-on time with the expansion, which will be in your sweaty palms, too, before you know it.

NEXT STOP: HADES

Immortal Throne picks up literally seconds after the original game ends. Now instead of heading to the credits after beating Typhon, the formerly final boss, you head through a portal to the city of Rhodes, where the prophet Tiresias tells you that—surprise!—your monster-killing days aren't over yet. In a story ripped from the headlines of Greek mythology (check Wikipedia, kids!), Tiresias sends you to Medea, a sorceress who gives you the rather grim news that an army of creatures is forming in Hades with the intention of rising up and retaking Greece. After making you kill the infamous Graeae sisters and bringing her the one eye they share, she opens up a portal on the other side of Greece, in Epirus, where you'll find an entrance to Hades, land of many monsters and really cool loot.

To go with this all-new act, Iron Lore has created a new skill tab, Dream Mastery (bringing the total class combinations up to 36), which the developers envision primarily (but not exclusively) as a secondary tab with great perks for both melee characters and casters, thanks to an assortment of powerful crowd-control area effects and buff skills.

Warriors and other melee fighters can now add to their arsenal tricks like Phantom Strike, which lets you momentarily disappear into the "dream world" and rematerialize for surprise attacks. Couple this with the Distort Reality skill, which sends out a humongous radial burst of energy, and fighters now have a fighting chance with the game's sometimes overwhelmingly large crowds. For Nature masters and other pet-summoner types, a new pet, a floating eye called the Nightmare, will not only boost the abilities of all other pets you control but will fire projectiles causing brutal piercing and vitality damage. Also key to Dream Mastery are three trances, powerful new buff skills (only one of which can be active at a time): Empathy, which reflects enemy damage back to monsters and siphons health back to you; Convalescence, which greatly increases your health-regeneration rate; and Wrath, which emits a constant electrical burn and causes skill-disruption damage to any enemy in your radius.

SHOPPING AIDS

Immortal Throne's other big enhancements were designed mostly to fix some of the original game's shortcomings. The most crucial: too much money on hand and not enough to spend it on, and too much great loot that you could neither store nor transfer to your other characters.

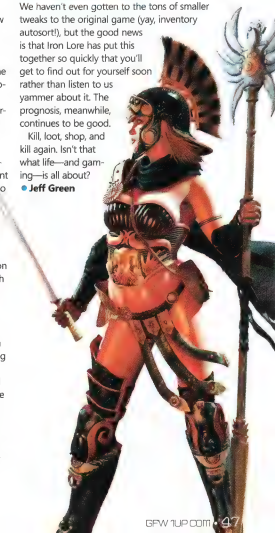
To solve the latter, Iron Lore has added caravans, an expandable stash for your stuff. You can drop items into the caravan's transfer area to make them accessible to any of your other characters—meaning that, for example, your Hunter can now finally use that great bow that your Conqueror found but had no use for. (To prevent egregious twinking, Iron Lore added level requirements to some items.)

On the money front, *Immortal Throne* features new NPCs called Enchanters, who will gladly take your hard-earned cash in exchange for new items called artifacts, which provide huge boosts for your characters—statistic bumps, new pets, new skills, and so on. To make an artifact, you'll first need a recipe, which comes from rare monster drops or quest rewards, and then collect the necessary ingredients—which won't be easy or quick, especially in Epic and Legendary modes. Nor are they cheap, with lower-tiered ones starting in the 75K range and divine artifacts going all the way up into the millions. Enchanters will also take your money to pull relics off items—though you have to sacrifice either the relic or the item to complete the deal. (At press time, Iron Lore was still debating about whether to finally let you add relics to blue epic items—possibly for Epic and Legendary characters—but don't get your hopes up.) Finally, you can blow your cash on scrolls—expensive new items that you can assign to your quickslot bar and that give you a humongous advantage, like a huge lightning strike, for just a few seconds, and with a long refresh time.

MORE, MORE, MORE

We haven't even gotten to the tons of smaller tweaks to the original game (yay, inventory autosort!), but the good news is that Iron Lore has put this together so quickly that you'll get to find out for yourself soon rather than listen to us yammer about it. The prognosis, meanwhile, continues to be good. Kill, loot, shop, and kill again. Isn't that what life—and gaming—is all about?

● **Jeff Green**



RANDOM ACCESS

10 things we're into this month

1 DOCTOR WHO

Ever since the BBC rebooted the classic *Dr. Who* series, it's been brilliant. Sharp writing, cheesy special effects—the works. If you thought the first season was awesome (it was), watch the second, now on DVD. And look online for the spin-off *Torchwood*—a very British take on *Men in Black*.

2 GEEKOHOLIC

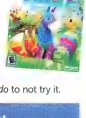
This little hunk of metal nerdity, also known as the Piet Hein Drink Cooler, is approved by scientists and refined drinkers alike. Drop the stainless steel blob in the freezer and then plonk it in a drink. It'll keep your booze cooler longer and—more importantly—won't water down your drink. The Piet Hein will run you $30 at thinkgeek.com.

3 WEIRD SCIENCE

Chickhood was tough for people like you. That life-size electric chair you built for the third-grade science fair? Totally unappreciated. The new book *Electronic Games for the Evil Genius* will satisfy that need for higher entertainment. So grab this tome and an electrolytic capacitor and shock your friends (see "The Tingler Project" in the book).

4 VIVA!

Here's one that caught us all completely off guard. We originally wrote off *Viva Piñata* as just some blah kiddie game for the Xbox 360. Hundreds of man-hours later, all we have to say is that the game is a muy bueno *Sims*-ish treat and you'd be...how do you say...*estupido* to not try it.



5 COMICAL

Every month, we pick out some odd comic book worth reading—now it's time for you to start showing your own creative muscle with the Comic Book Creator (www.planetwidegames.com). No artistic talent? No problem! For $30, you have everything you need to slap together your own pulp fiction: fonts, characters, layouts, and more.

6 T-QUALIZER SHIRT

So just how loud is it at the club? Leave your fancy decibel meter at home and just wear this battery-operated T-shirt instead. It responds to ambient sound. You'll be the coolest tool at the party. And at what price fashion? A mere $40 at thinkgeek.com.

7 SILVERSUN PICKUPS

Miss Smashing Pumpkins? Pining away for My Bloody Valentine? Do their new album *Carnavas*. The Silversun Pickups weave the overdone grunge of the 1990s while bemoaning a moody new wave note from the 1980s. The result: something that'll either leave you fanning about the blatant mimicry, setting your iPod to "repeat," or both.

8 PLAYING DOCTOR

We regularly dress up in operating-room scrubs at work. But if you own a Wii, we prescribe *Trauma Center: Second Opinion*, a remake of last year's DS game. Use that wacky Wii Remote controller to perform delicate operations in your boxers. Oh, and that red stain on the couch? It's ketchup from a double cheeseburger, not blood.

9 DORKUS REX

Fans of The Mr. T Experience need to check out front man Frank Portman's first stab at fiction, *King Dork*. Based upon a song, the book is a funny, self-effacing look at teenage misfit Tom Henderson—and it'll remind you of your own grueling high school existence. The best part: As fists of Holden Caulfield yank through, Portman simultaneously pokes fun at *The Catcher in the Rye*.

10 THAT'S SUPER

Dust off your capes and Underoos. Richard Donner, director of the first two Christopher Reeve flicks, is back in the editing room and releasing a new version of *Superman II* on DVD. More Marlon Brando (predeath), more Margot Kidder (prebreakdown), and more...super... stuff. Oh, just get it.

PIPELINE

Save some cash for these upcoming games

JANUARY 2007	PUBLISHER
Battlestations: Midway	Eidos Interactive
Europa Universalis III	Paradox Interactive
Heart of Empire: Rome	Paradox Interactive
Jade Empire	2K Games
Patriots: A Nation Under Fire	DreamCatcher
Vanguard: Saga of Heroes	SOE
World of WarCraft: The Burning Crusade	Blizzard
FEBRUARY 2007	**PUBLISHER**
Fuel	DreamCatcher
Gods & Heroes: Rome Rising	SOE
L.A. Street Racing	Groove Games
Maelstrom	Codemasters
PureSim Baseball 2006	Matrix Games
The Sims 2: Seasons	Electronic Arts
Storm of War: Battle of Britain	Ubisoft
Supreme Commander	THQ
Test Drive Unlimited	Atari
UFO: Extraterrestrials	Tri Synergy
War Front: Turning Point	CDV Software
MARCH 2007	**PUBLISHER**
Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars	Electronic Arts
Enemy Territory: Quake Wars	Activision
Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter 2	Ubisoft
The Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar	Midway
Resident Evil 4	Ubisoft
Silverfall	Deep Silver
TimeShift	Vivendi Games
Titan Quest: Immortal Throne	THQ
Two Worlds	TopWare Interactive
SPRING 2007	**PUBLISHER**
Alone in the Dark	Atari
Anarchy Online: Lost Eden	Funcom
BioShock	2K Games
Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway	Ubisoft
Call of Juarez	Ubisoft
Frontlines: Fuel of War	THQ
Galactic Civilizations II: Dark Avatar	Stardock
Great Invasions	Strategy First
Half-Life 2: Episode Two	Valve
Haze	Ubisoft
Huxley	Webzen
The Sacred Rings	DreamCatcher
S.T.A.L.K.E.R. Shadow of Chernobyl	THQ
Sam Suede: Undercover Exposure	iBase Entertainment
Seven Kingdoms: Conquest	Enlight Software
Shadowrun	Microsoft

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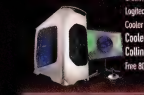

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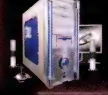

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THE FREELOADER PRESENTS

101 FREE GAMES

THE BEST GAMES THAT MONEY CAN'T BUY

FREE ONLINE
In our ongoing quest to obfuscate your browser habits, we're making it easier than ever to score all the freebies in this story. All 101 free games you'll have are linked at GFW03.1UP.com. Still too much work, you lazy slob? All the games are also at FileFront.com.
1UP NETWORK
XTRAS

SHOOTING GALLERY

UNLIMITED AMMO

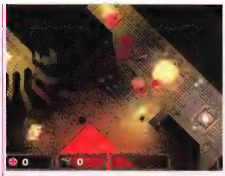
Everyone loves free stuff—but what do you have to show for surviving the holiday gift-giving season? Some strange reindeer-horned slippers from Aunt Paulette and an empty bank account. Penniless and gameless—welcome to The Freeloader's world.

I've bamboozled my good buddies at *GFW* into tracking down 101 (OK, so there are over 101—you gonna complain?) no-strings-attached free games for you to sink some valuable time into. They've got everything—from RPGs to real-time strategy to *Asteroids* Flash games—packed in here. Heck, they even threw in a couple mods to get the most out of all those old military shooters you bought. (What's that about, anyhow?) Too lazy to type in all these URLs? How about typing just one: GFW03.1UP.com? Most of the games are just sitting there waiting for you. Besides, it's not like you have to pay anything for 'em.

• The Freeloader

Free Faves

Parents and teachers don't play favorites, but The Freeloader certainly does. Look for this logo of his royal loafiness throughout this list for pure freebie gold.



Bloodmasters

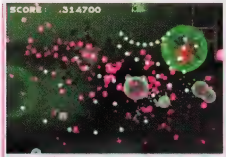
www.bloodmasters.com

You can't actually master it, but you can sure spill a lot of it in this top-down multiplayer shooter with deathmatch, team deathmatch, and capture-the-flag modes.

Gunroar

www.asahi-net.or.jp/~cs8k-cyu/windows/gr_e.html

This game reminds us of an über-stylish, vector-graphics version of *Raid Over Bungeling Bay*—except with a boat. (Extra nerd points if you know the game we're referring to.)



Harmotion

www.harmotion.org

This musical, cooperative multiplayer space shooter pits you and a friend against mankind's greatest foe: evil polygonal shapes. *Harmotion* is groovy digital proof that we *can* all get along...as long as we have someone else to slay together.

Mu-cade

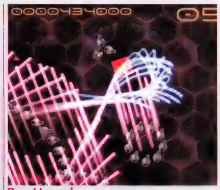
www.asahi-net.or.jp/~cs8k-cyu/windows/mcd_e.html

OK, hotshot. You're trapped in a box with a bunch of freaky geometric shapes. What do you do? *What do you do?* Don't ask: just shoot.

Nanozoa

http://lowfuel.melnicek.cz/nanozoa

It's not very long by most shooter standards, but it's got a unique style that makes it worth the fantastic voyage. You're piloting a nanobot, fighting human infections, watching everything unfurl as if through real medical equipment. Go on, call a doctor and see what he thinks.



Ray-Hound

www18.big.or.jp/~hikoza/Prod/index.html

When is a shooter not a shooter? When you don't ever actually pull a trigger. In *Ray-Hound*, you control a spacecraft with a funky gravitational field. Activate the field in short bursts to redirect enemy fire back at them.

Titanion

www.asahi-net.or.jp/~cs8k-cyu/windows/ttn_e.html

Think *Galaga*. You stick around the bottom while stuff swoops down to screw with you.

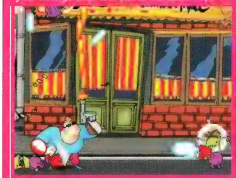
ACTION TRIP

SIDE-SCROLLERS AND BLAST-EM-UPS

Armada Online

www.armada-online.com

The best way to sum up this free MMO: Star Control with gorgeous graphics—and lots of other people to shoot. Pick a starter race, arm your ships, and sail around the universe.



Captain Binary

http://binarny.pjwstk.edu.pl/en

This throwback to the good ol' days of 2D-scrolling blasterfests is packed with action—and high alien body counts. And yes, apparently, alien blood is red.

Cholo

http://cholo.ovine.net/terminal

Nobody makes good cyberpunk games these days. Well, almost nobody. Cholo is all about controlling a robot through a postapocalyptic city. You'll see through its eyes and groove on the very '80s-like graphics.

The Cleaner

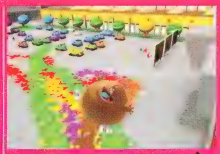
www.darthlupi.com/?page_id=4

The Cleaner looks like a descendant of the classic surrealist adventure *Out of This World* but plays more like a side-scrolling shooter. Good luck trying to figure out the plot. The best we can guess is that you're some uber-henchman, and you have some sort of psychic powers. Your wife has just been offed by some extraterrestrial...eh, screw it. You shoot stuff and it dies in cool ways.

Battle of Britain: Commando

www.miniclip.com/games/commando/en

Remember Sky Kid? This game's not a long way from a pretty sweet Flash tribute game. It's got the style, the gameplay, and a killer soundtrack—for a 1MB game.



The Blob

www.gamedev.net/community/forums/topic.asp?topic_id=401276

Ready to paint the town red? How about green? Or are you in a blue period? Just beware the room in black. This awesome student project casts you as an alien with a pleasure problem. As you roll around absorbing people, you get larger and change colors. Ultimately, you're supposed to add a little color to this drab world.

Dogfight: Battle in the Skies

www.acid-play.com/download/dogfight-battle-in-the-skies

This World War I–themed flying fighter aims to mind the old arcade game *Time Pilot*. Don't let the German-only menus stark you off. Think of it as "getting in character" if you want to be the Red Baron.

A Game with a Kitty: Darkside Adventures

www.origamihero.com/#8

He's short, hairy, and loves bashing bad guys in 2D. Sorry, Marion—in a game inspired by classic, side-scrolling adventures, this kitty shoots stars and kicks koala butt.

Lugaru

www.wolfire.com/lugaru.html

Rabbit is the gravest of bunny and he's about to spit hares. A lung fu ba'lak seeking revenge for his slaughtered village? It may be a mess, but this Dogz hypnosis-ish title is worth a download.

MultiHero

http://files.filefront.com/MultiHero/;5475965;;/fileinfo.html

Spider-Man, Batmobiles, dudes from Dragon Ball Z, Ninja Gaiden, and Kirby collide in this Super Smash Brothers–ish mash-up of old 2D games. Blame a classic character, and he probably makes a cameo. It's like visiting a video-game retirement home and getting your ass kicked. There's also an adventure mode. That's like two free games in one!

N

www.harveycartel.org/metanet/n.html

Lode Runner flashback ahoy! Control a stick figure ninja in this 2D platformer and get hypnotized by the elegantly simple gameplay.

Ninja Loves Pirate

www.ninjalovespirate.com

Mary Jane loves Spider-Man; Jesse loves Ninja. We love both. Feel the love—and the side-scrolling action—festered between two of geekdom's most iconic legends.

Paroxysm

www.create-games.com/download.asp?id=6488

"You have fallen into a dungeon and there is no way out, except to go through it..." That's the whole backstory for the gory 2D *Prince of Persia*–like *Paroxysm*. Forget Hollywood scripts and dramatic plot moments—sometimes all you need is a freakin' dungeon.

Sopwith 3.0

http://sopwith.classicgaming.gamespy.com/sop3.htm

Here's to the simpler days of aerial ferrets in biplanes, barnstorming, and cows. Lots of cows. This is a loving remake of a classic action/strategy game (optimized for multiplayer) where the point is to take out the opponents' units.

Tobio

http://tobio.csnation.net

The Good Kids and Fire Friends have a legitimate beef that can only be settled by grabbing the other side's flag. Only instead of using weapons, they grab blocks in the environment and stack 'em at their foes. So cutesy, yet so kick-ass.

GARAGE SATIRE

GAMES THAT HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY

Disaffected

www.persuasivegames.com/games/game.aspx?game=disaffected

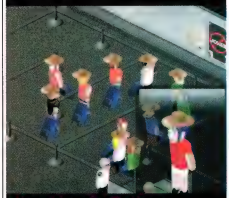
FedEx Kinko's may not seem like a hotbed of activity, but it's secretly run by a cabal of elitist grad students and goofy slackers who sneer and screw up print orders. This spot-on satire makes you one of the disaffected troops trying to do your job—or just slacking off and screwing up orders.

I'm OK

NSFW!

www.dollidol.com/ImOK

Antigame advocate Jack Thompson said he would donate $10,000 to charity if anybody would design and release a videogame based on his crackpot ideas—and lo and behold, someone did just that (though Thompson reneged on his charity offer). Thompson's design specification, from a press release: "Osaki Kim hops a plane from LAX to New York to reach the Long Island home of the CEO of the company (Take This) that made the murder simulator on which his son's killer trained. O.K. gets 'justice' by taking out this female CEO along with her husband and kids. 'An eye for an eye,' says O.K., as he urinates onto the severed brain stems of the Eibel family victims." Wow.



Airport Security: The Game

www.addictinggames.com/airportsecurity.html

Here's a Flash game that mocks the absurdity of airport security by putting you in charge of checking and removing weapons of mass destruction—you know, like pants.

10-MINUTE TIME WASTERS

MAYBE EVEN FIVE

BallDroppings

www.balldroppings.com

It's more Zen physics and sound experiment than actual game; set up angles and watch the balls drop. They make different sounds depending on angle and velocity. Om.

Frog Hunt

www.freelunchdesign.com/games.php

The maker of *Frog Hunt* (who also made, um, *Super Monster Painter Extreme*) admits that it could very well be the worst game ever (it "messes with the fundamental laws of gameplay")—but there is something strangely addictive about trying to catch these damnphibians.

The Missile Game 3D

www.fizzlebot.com/dxinteractive/missile3d.php

The life of a missile is lonely. No one truly appreciates the poor, besotted bringers of aerial death. So, in an effort to better understand, someone created a game that gives you a missile's-eye-view of its world.

Neko-Tuna

www.nekogames.com

A cat on a ball that rolls over rope to collect gems and avoid spikes—this game's got it all covered.

Nickys Infuriating Game of Joy

www.experimentalgameplay.com/game.php?g=161

Crap aliens (Nicky's descriptor—not ours) are bearing down upon your favorite city—but you have no weapons. So how are you supposed to fight them off? With your mouse, of course!

Orbital Sniper

www.acid-play.com/download/orbital-sniper

Welcome to the bright, shiny future of warfare. You're operating a spy satellite and need to target and fry assassins from your Google Maps–ish perspective before they kill the VIPs you're protecting.

Pluto Strikes Back

www.kloonigames.com/blog/games/pluto

You're orbiting along, minding your own business. Then, one day, someone says, "Screw you, Pluto—you're not a planet anymore." This goofy arcade tale of interstellar object 134340's revenge will take you about two seconds to pick up.

Rat Maze

www.pixeljam.com/ratmaze

The name pretty much says it all: You're a rat. In a maze. OK, so there's a little more to it: You run. You eat cheese. You groove to funky 8-bit audio.

ADVENTURER'S ISLAND

SAVE THE [BLANK], SAVE THE WORLD

Ben Jordan: Paranormal Investigator

www.grundislavgames.com/benjordan

College grad Ben Jordan turns to the paranormal to earn a buck in this Sierra-style graphic adventure. His first mission: discover the secret of the Skunk-Ape, a Bigfoot that got its name "because of its horrible smell, described as a mixture of moldy cheese, rotten eggs, and dung." Yum.

Chicken vs. Road

http://software.filefront.com/Chicken%20vs.%20Road_Information/;5395;/software_information.html

Clucksworth is finally ready to see the world. The only thing in his way: the road. This goofy but short graphic adventure will make you laugh—and probably hum "Raindrops Keep Fallin' on My Head" for days.

Duel Toys

http://paginas.terra.com.br/lazer/fanzic/dt/down.htm

Looking like it came from the Game Boy Advance, *Duel Toys* is a little bit *Mega Man Battle Network* adventure and a whole lot *Street Fighter* action.

Full Throttle: The Movie

www.gamershell.com/download_12100.shtm

If you're still sad about the death of the graphic adventure and the cancellation of that new *Full Throttle* game a couple years back, 1) get over it and 2) watch this movie that strings together all the scenes from the game.

Homeland Unicom

www.bigbluecup.com/games.php?action=detail&id=813

Good writing plus some hand-drawn illustrations equals a great (but short) adventure game.

J.D. Spy 3.05

www.filefront.com

Don't judge a book by its cover—*J.D. Spy* may not look like much, with its text-heavy windows and faux e-mail reader, but it's deviously clever. Your desktop becomes a spy decryption tool as you look for hints as to what's happening in-game.

JonnyRPG

www.jonnycomics.com/jonnyrpg

Following the model of old-school 8-bit console RPGs, you are Jonny, a gaming nerd looking to get his next fix—with plenty of yuks and nods to the game-verse along the way.

Liberal Crime Squad

NSFW!

www.bay12games.com/lcs

This tongue-in-cheek text adventure pits you against the forces of leftist Intellectualism. For freedom! Warning: Not suitable for kids or anyone who works for Fox News.

No-Action Jackson

www.talesofinterest.com/no-action

No-Action Jackson instantly recalls the classic LucasArts adventure *Day of the Tentacle*, and its hero is someone we can actually relate to: a meek kid who still dreams of reliving his days as a feared dungeon master.

Penumbra

http://frictionalgames.com/penumbra

This incredible-looking first-person horror thriller lets you manipulate the environment to beat back nasty beasties that follow and hunt you. It's even got a moral: The next time you do something dangerous, bring along a flashlight and a roll of duct tape. Just trust us on that one.

BRAIN BENDERS

GUARANTEED TO MESS WITH YOUR SYNAPSES

What Linus Bruckman Sees When His Eyes Are Closed

www.silipames.com/linus

Can the name of this game be any longer? This crazy-good adventure game is just plain crazy. The top half of the screen follows a samurai in feudal Japan; a spacey comedy graphic adventure unfolds in the bottom. Your brain will hurt, so factor in the cost of aspirin.

Iris (Half-Life 2 Mod)

www.fileplanet.com/170206/170000/fileinfo/Half-Life-2---Iris-mod

Some students from Denmark put together this sweet little graphic adventure in Valve's Source engine. The puzzle-heavy story follows Iris from 2006 to 2024—and if the students didn't get an A+, there's something wrong with the world.

DESKTOP ARCADE

GIVE NO QUARTER

+ | -

Control a magnet to manipulate electrons...and try to keep that damn Paula Abdul song out of your head. "I take two steps forward, I take two steps back...." Crap.

Cytoplasm

Grab that microscope and see how *Mortal Kombat* goes down on the cellular level. Kontrol a swarm of cellular kreatures and klaim your turf.

Every Extend

Before buying the PSP game *Every Extend Extra*, check out the free game it's based upon. Between the techno grooves and chained explosions, this *Lumines*-y bit of freeware is dangerously addictive.

Frets on Fire

If you're still waiting for *Guitar Hero* to rawk the PC, stop holding your breath and get this open-source alternative. Plenty of Internet Angus Youngs have already uploaded hot licks for you to practice—on your PC's keyboard, alas.

Gamma Brothers

You think your commute is bad? This hyper-pixelly neo-retro space shooter follows Buzz and Zap Gamma's alien-infested trip to and from their hugely important job near Jupiter.

Ghostbusters 3D Back in Action

A one-level experimental 3D tribute to one of our favorite Bill Murray/Dan Ackroyd flicks—and one of its most memorable moments.

Future Pinball

Pinball rocks, pure and simple, no matter what form it's in. This lets you create beautiful virtual pinball games—and some amazingly talented people have already created a bunch of free tables. We could technically count this entry as about 30 good free games.

Neverball

It's like *Super Monkey Ball*, minus the monkeys. Tilt the floor, roll the ball, get through the maze.

Slimy Pete's Singles Bar

In an olde tyme bar, two patrons chat. Slimy Pete, the establishment's proprietor, butts into the conversation to get the potential lovebirds to pair up. Line up the conversation bubbles that appear over their heads and they get closer together.

Square Off

Draw squares and chuck 'em at your opponent—it's like playing with a pissed-off Mondrian painting. How's that for highbrow?

Carious Welting 2

File under "Huh?" You're a fleshy, carnivorous pile of ick. You eat things that look like worms at the bottom of a tequila bottle. You shoot everything else with vomitous, bloody projectiles. The almost hand-drawn look makes it just a *little* less creepy than it sounds. Both Flash and full versions of the game are available for consumption.

Within a Deep Forest

Existential poetry or cute 2D platformer? A sentient bouncing ball with eyes fights an evil doctor to a good soundtrack. Sounds like the latter.

FIGHT CLUB

GET YOUR HICKS FOR FREE

Dot Fighters

http://takase.syuriken.jp/DF_index.html

If mano-a-mano Street Fighter II–style fighters had grown up in the 8-bit era, the result might have looked like *Dot Fighters*—blocky brawlers, nearly ninjas, run up karate experts, and all. Fair warning: You'll need to install the Japanese language pack in order to get this game running.

Light Destiny

http://kazasu.web.infoseek.co.jp/game1.htm

Think of this 2D anime-based Japanese fighting game as a sort of a low-rent Guilty Gear or Samurai Shodown—see how high you can build your "hero" meter up!

Kung Fu: Deadly Arts

www.skillground.com

If you dream of competing against pros like Totality in gaming tournaments for big stacks of cash, Skillground.com is a good place to start. The games (such as *Kung Fu*—which is console-quality and even works with the Xbox 360 controller) are free, and you might actually win money by playing or betting on the matches. Skillground.com takes a 15-percent cut in bets; the rest of the pool goes to the winner.

Toribash

www.toribash.com

The Matrix Seal slow-motion kung fu moves to death, but that doesn't stop us from enjoying Toribash, a turn-based strategy fighting game where stick figures beat each other a new one.

FIRST-PERSON SHOOTERS

BANG FOR NO BUCH

America's Army: Special Forces

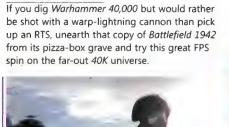
www.americasarmy.com

Your tax dollars are going to more than just some dopey "Army of One" commercials you flick past on TiVo—they're going to this officially sponsored first-person shooter, too. Go to sniper school. Go on missions with real gear. Go to the virtual recruitment center and get drafted in-game.

Battlefield 40K (Battlefield 1942 Mod)

www.fileplanet.com/169061/160000/fileinfo/Battlefield-1942---Battlefield-40k-Mod

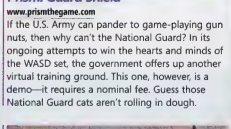
If you dig *Warhammer 40,000* but would rather be shot with a warp-lightning cannon than pick up an RTS, unearth that copy of *Battlefield 1942* from its pizza-box grave and try this great FPS spin on the far-out *40K* universe.



Prism: Guard Shield

www.prismthegame.com

If the U.S. Army can pander to game-playing gun nuts, then why can't the National Guard? In its ongoing attempts to win the hearts and minds of the WASD set, the government offers up another virtual training ground. This one, however, is a demo—it requires a nominal fee. Guess those National Guard cats aren't rolling in dough.



Rock 24 (Half-Life 2 Mod)

www.fileplanet.com/170593/170000/fileinfo/Half-Life-2---Rock-24-mod

We had a ton of fun kicking the tires on this prison-break mod, which could nearly stand in for a full *HL2* episode. Our only gripe: Your goal is to save "Dr. Newell." You guys really need to suck up to Gabe that bad?

Shootout! The Game

www.history.com/games.do

If all shooters were this educational, kids would be motivated to stay awake in class. *Shootout!* is an episodic series of games based on a History Channel show—watch the show, and then play a re-creation of a famous battle in-game.

Starseige: 2845

http://www.starsiege2845.com/splash3.html

BF1942 wasn't the first team-based objective fragfest—*Starseige: Tribes* introduced that futuristic fighting formula. Now, a dedicated group of fans are modding *Tribes: Vengeance* to re-create the classic series that started it all.

Sauerbraten

http://strlen.com/sauerbraten

It's free, it's got multiplayer *and* single-player modes, and it comes with a free FPS engine/editor so you can build your own maps and games. That's a whole new level of freeness. Perfect for both stingy and creative gamers alike.

Tremulous

www.tremulous.net

Until the day when aliens and humans can all just get along, we'll have fodder for FPS games—including this awesome one that mixes in moderate RTS elements. Even better: Here's a team-based FPS where each side actually feels different. It might tide you over until *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars*.

PUZZLE

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Abstractica

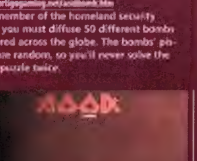
www.create-games.com/download.asp?id=6405

No specular lighting, special effects, or 3D graphics—not even a single explosion. *Abstractica* is just a series of deceptively simple-looking brainteasers designed to test how quickly your head hurts when playing it.

Acidbomb

www.vertigogaming.net/acidbomb.htm

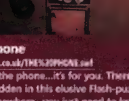
As a member of the homeland security team, you must diffuse 50 different bombs scattered across the globe. The bombs' buttons are random, so you'll never solve the same puzzle twice.



The Phone

www.2000.co.uk/THE%20PHONE.swf

Pick up the phone...it's for you. There's a game hidden in this elusive Flash-puzzle mystery somewhere...you just need to know how to find it.



Tripline

www.brejak.org/games.htm

It looks simple enough: just some odd shapes hand-drawn on some graph paper. All you need to do is connect all the shapes without crossing lines. The first few levels are easy—but good luck carving through all 30.

SIM CITY

EVEN BETTER THAN THE REAL THING

Babylon 5: I've Found Her—Danger and Opportunity

http://ifh.firstones.com

The days of *Wing Commander* are gone but not forgotten. *B5:IFH* is a spot-on tribute to the space-sim classic and cult sci-fi show. This free expansion to the already free game will fire up your Starfury.

FlightGear

www.flightgear.org

You really want to play *Flight Simulator X* but you neither have a good PC to play it on nor the 50 bones in your pocket to buy it. No problem—a good, free flight sim is cleared for takeoff.

Transcendence

http://neurohack.com/transcendence

Sail the stars, blow up people (in multiplayer or rolling solo), and score some phat lewt in this top-down space sim. The biggest surprise: realizing that we'd actually pay money for it.

GameBiz 2

www.veloci.dk/gamebiz/gb2

You think it's easy making a game? How about you try it, tough guy? This fairly detailed sim will let you do everything from create a game engine to market the sucker. Get a good GameRankings.com score or kiss that bonus goodbye!

McDonald's Videogame

www.mcvideogame.com

You thought that all that went into McDonald's french fries was pixie dust, magic, and grade-A beef? Well, it's time to teach you the business. You'll do everything from plow the land to set up ad campaigns to rope in more unsuspecting kids...er, customers.

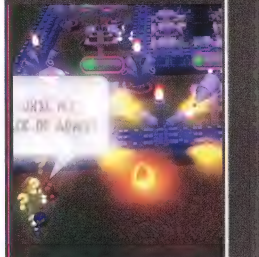
ARMCHAIR STRATEGY

TURN-BASED, REAL-TIME, AND ON THE HOUSE

8 Kingdoms

http://kralovstvi.sourceforge.net/index.php

This 3D tribute to fantasy turn-based gaming is ideal for grognards hankering for the good ol' days. With a single-player mode, multiplayer support, and a map editor, you too can feel like you never left your mom's basement. We feel five shades nerdier just writing about it.



Base Invaders!

www.digipen.edu/GameGallery/websites/Base_Invaders

Set up defenses and traps or just use your in-game hand to hurl the cute, cuddly bad guys away from your base. The best part of the game: the sound of repelled invaders getting squished.

Battle for Wesnoth

www.wesnoth.org

If you dig the anime-heavy Game Boy Advance game *Fire Emblem*, here's a deeper, prettier, PC-friendlier game that has a lot of the same flavor.

Dark Oberon

http://dark-oberon.sourceforge.net

Remember when RTS games were simple, back before fancy-pants stuff like *Company of Heroes* and *Age of Empires III* came knocking? *Dark Oberon* hearkens back to those days with a decidedly *WarCraft II*–ish visual motif and textures based on handmade models.

gate 88

www.queasygames.com/gate88

It starts off simple enough as you pilot a ship around in 2D space. And it looks kinda like *Asteroids*. But soon you're building structures, turrets, factories, and research stations. Bone up on strategies playing the A.I., or take it online.

THE SPORTS SECTION

SWING, SKATE, AND SHOOT

Ultimate Baseball Online

www.ultimatebaseballonline.com

Take me online to the ballgame. Just don't make me pay for the privilege. *UBO* is great for *High Heat Baseball* fans missing their annual fix—create your own player for the draft, then level up skills MMO-style. All that's missing are BALCO-branded 'roids for power-leveling.

Dart M Up

www.arid-play.com/download/dart-n-up

What's the first thing you give a drunk guy in a bar? If you answered "sharp throwable objects," congratulations! Bone up on your hurling skills—and sprinkle some peanut shells on the floor around your PC if you feel something's missing.

Ethnies Street Sesh

www.flashgames247.com/play/773.html

Tony who? It may not be a proper, hardcore extreme sports simulator, but it's good if you want a quick online skateboarding fix. The only thing that might bum people out is the blatant Etnies advertisement staring back at you the whole damn time you're playing.

TRIBUTES AND REMAKES

OLD CLASSICS HANDLED WITH CARE

Armagetron

www.armagetronad.net

You can argue all day whether it was the light cycles or seeing respectable actors strap on Day-Glo neoprene that made *Tron*—but you can't argue with a good tribute game. Unlike the four-player matches in the film, this bad boy pits 16 racers against each other online.

Robocop 2D 2: Robocop vs. Terminator

www.parkproductions.btinternet.co.uk

Robocop: cybernetic cop of the near future. Terminator: cybernetic governor of Kahlifornia. Pit them against each other, and watch your per-capita ass-kicking rate soar.

Super Mario: Blue Twilight DX

http://blazefire.moogleavern.com/sekrit/mween

Consoles this, consoles that. Everybody yammers on about how you can't play those sorts of games on a PC. Well, has everybody tried this 2D/3D homage to a certain mustachioed plumber? It rocks the shrooms like nobody's business.

Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy

www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/hitchhikers/game_nolan.shtml

This Web remake reimagines the classic Infocom text adventure as a graphic adventure. As long as the website remains up, this remains one of our top online freebie choices of all time.

The Silver Lining

www.tsl-game.com

All right, raise your hand if you've wasted more man-hours than you can count playing *King's Quest* and its ilk. A team of fellow devotees have poured years into creating a fan-fiction ninth episode in the series.

King's Quest III

www.infamous-adventures.com

The latest Sierra fan tribute: A 256-color remake of Roberta Williams' *King's Quest III: To Heir Is Human*. The story centers on a medieval slave named Gwydion who frantically seeks to escape the evil wizard who lords over him. This new version implements a point-and-click interface identical to Sierra's later graphic adventures, as well as full voice acting and some quirky new bits of humor. And if you missed 'em, check out the *KQ1* and *KQ2* remakes at www.agdinteractive.com.

Maniac Mansion Deluxe

www.gamershell.com/download_5988.shtml

Remember the salad days of PC gaming, when there were graphic adventures as far as the eye could see, and LucasArts actually did something besides churn out *Star Wars* stuff? A group of devoted fans remembers, too, and has remade one of the greatest (and funniest) games ever.

Ghostbusters

www.caiman.us/scripts/fw/f2567.html

Who you gonna call when you want an homage to the original 8-bit-era *Ghostbusters* game? This one had a little bit of everything—driving, building climbing, stream crossing, and a big ol' hopping marshmallow man to sneak beneath.

Star Wars

www.minionsoft.com/starwars/starwars.htm

Remember that old vector graphics arcade game that put you in a "realistic" X-wing fighter's cockpit? This remake not only captures the flavor of the original game, it even updates it with full textures and sound files from the movie.

Xwars

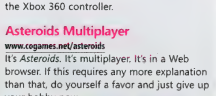
www.gamedev.net/community/forums/topic.asp?topic_id=417391

Xbox 360 owners got a cool vector art shooting game called *Geometry Wars*. You and I? We've got ourselves a freebie-in-development called *Xwars*. It even supports the Xbox 360 controller.

Asteroids Multiplayer

www.cogames.net/asteroids

It's *Asteroids*. It's multiplayer. It's in a Web browser. If this requires any more explanation than that, do yourself a favor and just give up your hobby now.



Typhoon 2001

http://typhoon.kuto.de

We used to play *Tempest* at the local pizza shop. Our dreams are still haunted by the layers of encrusted grease from other lunchtime slackers. Relive happier times with this remake.

FREE AT LAST

FORMERLY ONLY AVAILABLE FOR CASH, THESE GAMES ARE NOW FREE FOR MASS CONSUMPTION

F.E.A.R. Combat

www.joinfear.com/main

Vivendi thought that the multiplayer firefights in *F.E.A.R.* deserved more props—so they decided to release *F.E.A.R. Combat* gratis. Play anyone online—even the suckers who bought the full game. That'll show them, buying games! Pfeh!

Railroad Tycoon

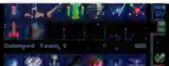
www.sidmeiersrailroads.com

Three cheers to 2K Games! While it continues to promote the new *Sid Meier's Railroads!*, it's decided to throw us all a gaming bone—a free copy of the original *Railroad Tycoon*.

Savage: Battle for Newerth

www.s2games.com/savage

You got your fantasy RTS game in my first-person shooter. One player plays "commander" while others play "units" down on the field following orders. This formerly retail deal is now free as part of S2 Games' plan to get folks excited for the upcoming *Savage* sequel.



Star Control II

http://sc2.sourceforge.net

This is a full port of classic *Star Control II*, whether you're jonesing for the original PC or slightly enhanced 3DO version. ●

POLITICIANS CONSIDER VIDEO GAMES TO BE AS DANGEROUS AS GUNS AND NARCOTICS. AND THEY'RE SPENDING $90 MILLION TO PROVE IT.

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THE CRO

WORLD EXCLUSIVE FIRST LOOK

Unmistakably Source-made, the Paris slum onscreen says "working-class commune" and "French civil unrest." Flying in the face of American imagination (in which bicycles, baguettes, and La Tour Eiffel figure first), it hints at high unemployment, a disastrously declining birthrate, police harassment, and anxiety over the nation's need for immigrant labor. As with *Half-Life 2*'s City 17—also the work of *The Crossing* art director Viktor Antonov—the location inscribes its history on facade and face alike.

The pair of player-controlled IBAT (International Bureau of Antiterrorism) troopers on the scene isn't at home here. If the boy who turns tail at their arrival doesn't say so, the comic-book insurgents down the street do.

"My only close-to-criminal record is a Michael Jackson joint."

Say what? Something screwier: Two of the agitators start shooting, then retreat into tenements to reload in a way A.I. actors seldom do. During their diversion, the third waits, watching IBAT inch toward the two inside. Their backs turned to him, he tiptoes in to pistol-whip one from behind, and squat, stand, squat, stand over the prone body. Tea-bagging bots?

While player two works out that tactics snuffed his partner (as opposed to a presto, offscreen spawn-in), he's thrown for one last loop. Dropping down from the slum's low skyline, a Techno-Knight Templar in mailcoat, helm, Holy Cross—the whole 13th-century works—impales the third thug.

Arkane Studios' *The Crossing* isn't what it seems, alternate universes and *A.I. that isn't A.I.* included. >

SSING

***Dark Messiah*-maker Arkane Studios' stupendous surprise** BY SHAWN ELLIOTT

**Indifferent to *Dark Messiah of Might and Magic*'s storytelling? According to producer Raphaël Colantonio, Arkane's chasing another approach with *The Crossing*: "*Messiah* leverages an existing license, and that inevitably imposed limitations. This time, we're doing things differently. We're working with *Half-Life 2* hand Viktor Antonov. We're addressing narration in new ways, and the writer is American."

"A.I. is stupid. Multiplayer is meaningless," says producer Raphaël Colantonio, pegging twin problems he's wrangled with for three years—a predicament whose unraveling requires the minting of new modes of play. "By stupid, I mean that no matter how capable artificial intelligence is, it can't compare to humans. How do you model believable behavior, simulate speech and moment-to-moment unpredictability?" Colantonio says. "As for multiplayer skirmishes, they're terrific—although always abstracted. You know, you do these things over and over again, and yet, aside from winning matches, there's no direct emotional involvement." *The Crossing*'s crossover fix: Merge single- and multiplayer, leveraging one's strength to support the other's weakness, and vice versa. Colantonio calls it "cross-play."

The ramifications ought to—aha!—reveal themselves. Colantonio gives the gist, just in case: "Say you're playing the storycentric campaign in *Half-Life*, or what have you. In order to move on, you must escape in a helicopter. Here, other players, as opposed to A.I. actors, are interested in supporting you, seeing you safely through. Then there are people playing for rank and recognition who want to prevent your progress. So..." But, this being the one occasion on which he's presented *The Crossing* and its systemic convolutions to the public, Colantonio wants to back up, disclose "where" and "why" before demonstrating, in real detail, "how."

THE SECOND ENTENDRE (IN THE CROSSING'S TITLE)

Victor Antonov not only thinks videogames need another ZIP code, he's founded a studio with top-talent French animators and former Universal and Disney designers to zone one. "Everybody can go big with graphics nowadays," he says. "What makes a great game world for me is context and history. The world itself is more than a presentation package for play; it's a character." From his point of view, cut-and-paste space stations and ready-made moonscapes sit beside L.A. and NYC as tried-and-tired backdrops, graveyards of dead-end game design. Perhaps pride has its part in the Frenchman's preferences, too: "Eighty million to 100 million people visit Paris per year. It's the most-visited place on earth, and it's very accessible. At the same time, it's a grand architectural treasure that videogames have overlooked." So Paris it is, although its *portraits* here reflect the eyes envisioning them in the way that Antonov's City 17, too, infused Eastern Europe with the artist's imprint.

The City of Light we see when *The Crossing* starts is a cordoned slum, a down-at-the-heel complex of squatters and nonexistent social support far from postcard Paris. Neither Antonov nor the segment we watch elaborates on the nature of the no-go zone other than to explain that bedlam follows the failure of the French government. Furthermore, *The Crossing*'s speculative fiction posits parallel universes, one of which is

WORK IN PROGRESS

All screens shown are from Arkane's first pass on a work in progress (in comparison, significant portions of *Half-Life 2* underwent five or six consecutive passes prior to completion). "It'll look great (an) later on," Antonov says.

Typical Parisian facades reveal neoclassical and Roman roots. *The Crossing*'s parallel universe reworks them Gothic.

on a timeline concurrent with our own until 1307, when, instead of disbanding under papal decree, as happened in our history, the Knights Templar assume control of the crown. Emissaries of a Christian military order, they somehow trek from their autocratic side of the coin to our lawless one on the reverse. Later, they enlist players (i.e., you) to dimension-hop home for still unspecified causes (i.e., Arkane isn't saying).

"When constructing *Half-Life 2*'s City 17, we looked back a hundred years, built layered architecture, beginning at the turn of the 20th century, and then accounting for the '30s, the Communist era, and alien invasion after it. Basically, the environment holds its own history, and by being there, you become aware of what happened before," Antonov says. "If, for instance, World War I hadn't happened, you'd see more metal buildings in Paris, since steel production went to tank- and bomb-building when the war started. So *The Crossing* is an interesting exercise, because this incident changed the world 600 years ago in the 14th century. France becomes a Crusading country. The Renaissance never happens, and European history is rerouted. That's ambitious."

Antonov is on top of it, tweaking Roman-rooted restraint into Gothic density, turning neoclassical architecture clustered and pointy. The trick is to leave enough underlying elements intact to foster some recognition even as newly introduced material surprises. Take smokestacks, for instance—typically Parisian. According to Antonov, "they're a great visual theme, and here they're growing into Gothic, monumental masses that suggest preeminent steam technology."

Antonov is absorbed in the videogame's vision of "our" Paris as well. "The riots broke out shortly after we drafted the design document," he says, referring to the civil unrest that followed the fatal electrocution of two teens at a Clichy-sous-Bois power substation in 2005. "I called Raphaël to say, 'Hey, this is happening in our story, too,' and so we went to Bobigny and took footage of torched cars. The tie with what's happening in Paris now is definitely intentional. You cited *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* and its context in Chernobyl, which is similar in that that team is Ukrainian and is using the game medium to express its experience with what's happened there."

That said, although *The Crossing* proposes an orderly Christian theocracy in one world and holds it up against an anarchic Paris in our own, Antonov underscores that this isn't the wishful thinking of reactionaries who see the riots as rooted in Islam rather than poverty. "No, no, this has nothing to do with nostalgia for Napoleon and French power," he says. "Oppressors, as in *Half-Life 2*, are often Big Brother–like. This is the complete opposite: a country in chaos. We see this with weak governments in Somalia, in Afghanistan. For contrast's sake, we create a counterbalance between chaos and a belligerent regime—two dystopian takes on one country. We're dodging religion; we're not dealing with that." >

"Hand-to-hand combat is a bit more brutal here than it is in *Dark Messiah*," says Colantonio. "More moves, more methods of execution, and more context—attack from above, the side, or behind."

CROSS-PLAY UNCROSSED

Solo-, mutli-, cross-play—confused? *The Crossing*'s untried modes aren't all complexity all the time. In the simplest sense, story missions are single-player shooting with an exception: naturally intelligent, people opponents take the place of A.I., if and when you want. So-called skirmish maps, on the other hand, are harder to wrap your head around in that their context and conventions kaleidoscope to accommodate the kinds of players playing. In milquetoast multiplayer mode, skirmishes pit two more or less symmetrical parties against one another, much like *Counter-Strike* or *Day of Defeat*. So far, fine. However, *The Crossing* also iterates on and integrates skirmishes into its solo/co-op content, and here's where the intricacy occurs.

According to Colantonio, "Once one story mission—in a campaign's cycle of story and skirmish maps—is complete, our servers select an appropriate match (according to criteria including difficulty setting, ping, language preference, and so on) and place story players in the queue for applicable skirmish maps." Conversely, the system explains to skirmishers that story players (or Elite soldiers) are now entering the next round—in which case, the server may (or may not) reassign specific skirmisher roles according to narrative need. For instance, it's possible that the skirmishers, who were competing as cops and thugs in two teams of 10, become one 20-man IBAT brigade charged with preventing the pair of Elites from accessing a control center. Meanwhile, another map might maintain two skirmisher teams: one to assist the Elites, one to assault them.

We diagram the dovetail with a sample scenario:

00:00: X and Y's mission, according to Templar comsat, involves breaking into a water-treatment plant's subtunnels to obtain and transport one of the Order's pneumatic drills via He-V exosuit (see: *Aliens*' Caterpillar power loader). Team IBAT's objective is to either a) filch the He-V and use it to batter down the Templar bunker's door, or b) assassinate both Templar Elites within any 30-second window. Team victory nets points in *The Crossing*'s ranking/promotion system, and players earn additional bonuses for personally besting Elites. The clock marks 15 minutes and ticking.

00:15: X and Y dash as a sniper fires from a nearby balcony. Y takes cover beside a car and notices more black-uniformed IBATs working the west perimeter. Reluctant to attack the Templars head on, they hide among a parking garage's concrete columns, taking potshots. Seeing the sniper relocate to a new position on an overpass, X boomerangs his blade but misses. Y's Templar tech then takes him out with a single shot.

01:00: While X proceeds to punch in the treatment facility key code, Y runs interference, attaching his grappling hook to a girder and mousing over an IBAT, killing him midmotion. He, too, is shot in the process, but his shields save him. Out of ammo, he continues fighting with the spring-loaded saber linked to his forearm.

02:00: X powers up the He-V, but it can't shoot while carrying the pneumatic device in its massive metal claws, so Y provides cover. All of a sudden, the drill drops and X dies. Y sees an IBAT in jetpack and ink-black armor zipping above, but his screen says player "Z"—not the up-ranked, upgraded officer in the air—sniped his partner.

02:20: As X sits out a 30-second respawn, skirmishers in Templar insignia arrive and attack the officer who's hijacked the He-V.

THE BEST OF BOTH SINGLE-PLAYER AND MULTIPLAYER SCENARIOS

If *The Crossing*'s worlds stand apart from others we've played in, so too the ways we play in them. "In traditional FPSes, you try the story first, finish it, and move on to multiplayer matches with people on separate servers," Colantonio says. "OK, so perhaps some play multiplayer first… Either way, they're separate entities. In *The Crossing*, and in cross-player, we support pools of story players and pools of what we call "skirmish players." Skirmishers play on skirmish servers, over and over again in short, 10- to 15-minute matches. Meanwhile, story players—co-op or solo—tackle missions until, at some point, they cross over and enter a skirmish. Suddenly, skirmishers switch to one of several possible objectives that help or hinder the story players' progress." (See "Cross-play Uncrossed," above.)

In addition, skirmishers are also able to role-play mercenaries and maraud story missions by occupying slots ordinarily set aside for A.I.s. Think of the *Matrix* movies, with Agent Smith–like mercs possessing peons as soon as peons spot players. "What happens," says Colantonio, "is that we use humans as fodder and hopefully keep everybody happy. Everyone has a unique experience every time—that's the point of it."

Low-level variability (as opposed to a video-game's unbending narrative backbone) defined much of Arkane's direction in its fantasy FPS *Dark Messiah of Might and Magic*. Colantonio argues that, if anything, that flexibility means more in the face of naturally intelligent challengers. "We're a system-oriented team," he says. "Instead of scripting this, that, and the other thing, we want to simulate it. Every entity responds to its own set of rules—buoyancy, flammability, [and so on]—and NPCs can interact with what you throw aside." In other words, actions trigger chain reactions in ways that reassure you you're an agent in a real world and not the central spectator of a recording.

Similarly, player traffic flows across networked paths, nearer in layout to an ant colony than a linear treasure map, and in ways that support multiple play styles. Colantonio wants you to "express yourself as a gamer" and is going all out to give you the tools to do so. "Conservative players," >

In story missions, Templar members stand by a statue and, when prompted, simply vanish into thin air. Creepy.

XTRAS

Cross-media: Visit GFWR.1UP.com for more info, video footage, and interviews with producer Raphaël Colantonio and art lead Viktor Antonov.

1UP NETWORK

> "INSTEAD OF SCRIPTING THIS, THAT, AND THE OTHER THING, WE SIMULATE IT."
>
> –RAPHAEL COLANTONIO, PRODUCER, ARKANE STUDIOS

he says, "sometimes want to fight from afar or try to set traps, while others prefer frontal confrontation. Say I'm not the best player, but I'm smart, and so with trip wires and whatnot, I can counter raw reflexes. Or maybe I'm more mobile and get around with a grappling hook. We're pushing body awareness well beyond what we did with it in *Dark Messiah*—because your whole body is being rendered, you connect with the world better; you see your bulk tugging as the rope tightens, and again as it absorbs impact on rocky touchdowns."

DESTINED TO DIE

That "story players" must complete missions necessarily constrains *The Crossing*—should bit players' odds against a protagonist even approach a fair 50-50, stalemate and narrative stuttering inevitably ensue. The "good" guys *have got to* win. And yet this game demands we take turns playing the dedicated loser's part. You have to ask, who's trading skyhooks, boomerang blades, and spring-powered pikes (a story player's Templar tech after siding with the Order) for five-and-dime ski masks, the quick for the dead? After all, designers such as Valve's own Robin Walker define A.I.'s duty as "live long enough to die deliberately."

Colantonio confirms that the die is loaded, but he maintains it doesn't matter. Look at live-action role playing (or LARPing), a kind of pajama-clad *Dungeons & Dragons* played in open air with latex and closed-cell foam swords. "People happily put on the orc mask, pretend to have fewer hit points than the heroes, and have fun. Try it and see," he says. (Perhaps *The Crossing* will offer role-playing servers in which sticklers stay in character.) Our willingness to get dressed up to get beat down notwithstanding, Arkane's also grooming players for these positions ("non-nonplayable characters," Colantonio quips) with carrot psychology: Simple participation nets points redeemable in skirmishes, and success in spite of the odds pays big. Trouble is, *The Crossing* is so far away from its scheduled 2008 release that Arkane has neither clinched unlocks outside of an IBAT jetpack (the studio's answer to the Templar skyhook), nor will it speculate out loud on ideas in development.

Moreover, Arkane argues (and we agree) that multiplay is, was, and always will be fundamentally funny. ("Place 20 people together in a game, give them all guns, and try telling them to stay serious; it doesn't work that way," as Walker once put it.) When buddies spawn in and start up a "Billie Jean" dance routine, guns wagging without firing, you roll a frag between them and get going. "It's the beauty of online gaming," Colantonio laughs. "Loaded moments like this are one-of-a-kind; they belong to you as a gamer."

"The contrast between a grand backstory and goofy stuff is cool," Antonov agrees. "We embrace peculiarity. We enjoy peculiarities these days."

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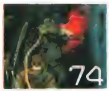


TRIPLE
Gothic 3
Another Oblivion?
Don't count on it.

DOUBLE
Splinter Cell Double Agent
Agent Sam Fisher is back...but whose side is he on?

QUINTUPLE
Heroes of Might and Magic V: Hammers of Fate
The age-old series continues to chug.

THIS MONTH IN REVIEWS...

Something interesting happened this month regarding our *Heroes of Might and Magic V: Hammers of Fate* review (read it on page 86). When inquiring with Ubisoft representatives about a reviewable version, I received this response: "Due to the newness of your review scale, and how it has not been weighted appropriately in the overall game ranking [aggregate] sites, we've been asked to only send you retail boxed copies for the time being."

Ubisoft's justification for this decision to withhold a review copy was that the company's currently pushing to revive the long-dormant *Might and Magic* franchise—and no-good review scores like our 4/10 for *Dark Messiah of Might and Magic* and 1UP.com's 5/10 for the original *Heroes V* "hurt the average" at websites like GameRankings.com.

Obviously, we managed to snag a copy anyway after a bit of diplomacy...but we're still discouraged by Ubisoft's attempt to dodge what it had assumed would be bad press—especially when our scale's been in effect at sister publications *EGM* and 1UP.com for nearly two decades. Besides, do review scores really influence sales? If so, then why do critical darlings like *Psychonauts* and *Beyond Good & Evil* bomb at retail? E-mail GFWletters@ziffdavis.com and tell us what you think! ● **Ryan Scott, Reviews Editor**

SCORE KEY

GFW uses a 10-point scoring scale to inform you, at a glance, whether or not a game is worth your hard-earned money. We strictly enforce a score of 5 as the median, meaning that any game receiving a score of 6+ is certainly worth playing—at least to some extent. Here's how the numbers break down:

Editors' Choice award
Any game scoring a 9 or higher receives a [illegible] award, signifying the very best in PC gaming.

9-10: Excellent
Genre benchmark—universally recommended.

7-8.5: Good
Enjoyable throughout, with minor flaws.

5-6.5: Average
Status quo. Only genre enthusiasts need apply.

3-4.5: Bad
Significant bugs or fundamental design issues.

0-2.5: Terrible
Never should have been made.

GOTHIC 3 WEARS "OLD SCHOOL" LIKE A BOY SCOUT BADGE, AND THAT'S TERRIFIC NEWS IF YOU'RE INTO THAT SORT OF THING.

You're probably wondering how *Gothic 3* stacks up against *Oblivion*, and the answer's easy: not favorably. Still, the environments are mighty pretty.

•*Gothic 3*'s skill system is premised on a few core attributes (fighting, hunting, magic, and so on) that break down into dozens of subskills. Over time, you'll learn to do things like hunt, skin, brew, cook, and prospect for ore.

•It's too bad combat's so screwy—it's the one thing a patch won't fix, and like in nearly all RPGs, it's the heart and soul of *Gothic 3*.

GOTHIC 3

There's a hole in my RPG, dear Liza, dear Liza

PUBLISHER: **Koch** DEVELOPER: **Piranha Bytes** GENRE: **RPG** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Teen**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **2GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 4.4GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **None** VERSION REVIEWED: **Retail Box**

REVIEW

Every RPG has its hook. Some are practically orbital, trading depth to trace the contours of entire continents. Others might as well be fantasy sports leagues for all their buckets of exotic info. *Gothic 3* is the culmination of a third approach that renders midsized environments in painstaking detail while keeping its mechanics simple and unpretentious. I definitely heart the latter, so it's a pity to report that *Gothic 3* was released too soon and with too many glitches to warrant a recommendation unless you're supremely patient and own a sturdy desk—because when *Gothic 3* chokes, you *will* pound it.

Gothic 3 picks up where *Gothic 2* left off, continuing the saga of the nameless hero who broke out of a magical prison and eventually slew an undead dragon. Fresh out of the frying pan (Khorinis, the island setting of the last two games), you disembark on the mainland in time to grapple with an inferno: Orcs have overrun the continent, enslaving most of the human population...and only the capital is holding out. As a free-roaming mercenary, you can join with the Orcs, side with the humans, or pass the buck entirely to follow a mysterious third path.

Most of the questing betweentimes boils down to the usual RPG chores. Kill some stuff to help a village; collect a bunch of stuff for a mage; defeat something to get five animal hides for a guy who tells you how to enter a building where another guy asks you to do more or less the same thing. Still, you have to admire the fidelity here. *Gothic 3* wears "old school" like a Boy Scout badge, and that's terrific news if you're into this sort of thing.

You'll travel through three distinct areas, including the frozen northern land of Nordmar and the southern desert of Varant.

BUGS...WHY'D IT HAVE TO BE BUGS?

Other kinds of fidelity are less admirable, and *Gothic* fans who put up with the last two games' foibles probably won't be shocked to hear that *Gothic 3*'s troubles come in two familiar flavors: loopy design choices and out-and-out bugs. The European version's been available for months, but even the patched U.S. version (up to v1.09 already—yikes) still has the creepy-crawlies. Loading or saving games sometimes elicits "out of memory" crashes. A few quests remain unfinishable because the game won't acknowledge that you completed them. Overlong quest descriptions in your journal get truncated and—this isn't so much a bug as a missing feature—NPCs no longer come a-running when you bust into their homes. Sleep in their beds, pilfer their goods...it's like paradise for newbie thieves or something.

> EVEN THE PATCHED U.S. VERSION (UP TO V1.09 ALREADY) STILL HAS THE CREEPY-CRAWLIES.

More weirdness: Some NPCs get stuck against crates and jitter in place or fall through objects, and the text names over their heads are some kind of fugly font that looks glued in. You're also denied a crosshair reticule, which means constantly stumbling over items or bodies you're trying to target. Visual effects like lens flare (cameras in medieval times, guys?) render everywhere, including straight through mountains and inside caves. And on high-end systems, the game pitches and heaves for several seconds as on-the-fly scenery loads, like film hitching in a crappy projector. None of these by themselves are showstoppers, but taken together they certainly scuff up the chrome.

It's the goofy combat, though, that's most off-putting. By holding different buttons on the keyboard in conjunction with variably timed mouse clicks, you can punch, jump-attack, parry, cast spells, loose arcing quarrels and arrows, and pull off killing blows. It all sounds wonderful in theory; in practice, the game's creatures and human enemies only seem to know two moves: "lunge" or "back-up-really-really-fast." Which means you're either clicking like mad to keep your backpedaling opponents at bay, or falling over (much too frequently) when they score a hit. It's tough to actually lose a battle if you click fast enough, because you're constantly stunning your opponents. In short, a combat system meant to be tactically plush comes off instead as shallow and monotonous.

The human cities are either overrun or under siege by Orcs...but which faction you choose to support is entirely up to you.

A LONG AND WINDING ROAD

Nine patches in, *Gothic 3* has a long row to hoe before rating "close enough for government work." Try it if you're hardcore and even-tempered. But yep, here we go again—closing with another "until it's adequately patched, caveat emptor." **Matt Peckham**

VERDICT

Deep character interaction; vast world to explore; intricate branching story.

Broken quests; glitchy visuals; wonky combat; save/load crashes.

5/10

AVERAGE

Games for Windows

Battle on the Barrow-wight Downs.

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE BATTLE FOR MIDDLE-EARTH II— THE RISE OF THE WITCH-KING

Not of this Middle-earth

PUBLISHER: Electronic Arts DEVELOPER: Griptonite Games/EALA GENRE: Real-time strategy PROTECTION: Retail ESRB RATING: Teen MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1.6GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 3GB hard drive space, The Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth II MULTIPLAYER: 8-8 players VERSION REVIEWED: Gold Master

REVIEW

For any other real-time strategy game, *Rise of the Witch-king* would be a pretty sweet expansion pack. You get a new faction, more units for the original factions, and improvements to old features. But a lot of the new content feels like pushing a square peg into a round hole, and the best features are simply corrective.

In the original game, the dynamic campaign and the custom hero creation felt like glommed-on afterthoughts. Their potential is finally realized in this expansion. The War of the Ring campaign is still a mess in terms of interface, but now it's built around a strategic economy that makes the interface worth the hassle. The changes to the create-a-hero system let you make rebalanced custom heroes whose costs are proportional to their powers; this adds a lot of flexibility and metagame strategy. It's also worth noting that the expansion lets groups of units move together rather than have each unit running ahead at its own speed. How was something this fundamental not already patched into the original game?

Beyond these fixes, *Rise of the Witch-king* heads off in its own direction. The new faction, Angmar, sounds great on paper—sorcerers with ice/death-themed powers, Thrall Masters who enslave other races, a couple of flavors of troll, and packs of wolves. But the problem with Angmar is that it relies too much on micromanagement. The lack of micromanagement—at least in terms of popping off carefully timed unit powers—was part of the fun of the original *Battle for Middle-earth II*. You could slam armies into each other and enjoy the spectacle rather than fuss with clicking little buttons at just the right moments. Button-clicking was limited to heroes or Ring powers that effected dramatic reversals of fortune.

THE NINE RIDE AGAIN V2.0

Some of the new units for each faction are also curious design choices. Each race gets elite units, halfway between heroes and armies. This is an odd place to occupy, and it muddies up the clear distinction between the heroic and the mundane. Like cadres of spellcasting sorcerers, it's not very Tolkien. The concept works well enough with Mordor's nazgul, who are now an elite cavalry squadron, but they're offset by everyone else's elite army. Oh, look, it's some nazgul. Aren't those guys just Sauron's counterpart to the Knights of Dol Amroth or the Goblin Fire Drake Brood? Remember when they used to be cool?

The inspiration for *Rise of the Witch-king* is an appendix from the books—so it's not surprising that none of the new content recalls anything from Peter Jackson's films. Again, one of the things that made *Battle for Middle-earth II* great was the way the game recalled the movies. As with the expansion for *Star Wars: Empire at War*, it's a tricky situation. How do you create new content for an expansion when a game relies on familiarity with a set of movies? In both instances, the developers simply invented all new stuff from outside the films. As a result, they lost the connection—and, therefore, a lot of the appeal of their games.

On the whole, BreakAway Games and EALA have some great ideas in *Return of the Witch-king*. It's too bad that many of these ideas—which seem to have tumbled out of some other game's design document—don't fit with *Battle for Middle-earth II*. **Tom Chick**

Cry havoc and let slip the dogs of Angmar.

VERDICT

- Things that are fixed.
- Things that are added.

6/10

AVERAGE

Games for Windows THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

> NONE OF THE NEW CONTENT RECALLS PETER JACKSON'S FILMS.

1701 A.D.

Kill them with Keynesian kisses

PUBLISHER Sierra DEVELOPER Ascaron/Related Designs RELEASED Sept. 27, 2006
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS 2.2GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 3.5GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard RECOMMENDED 2-8 players VERSION REVIEWED Gold Master
ESRB RATING Everyone 10+

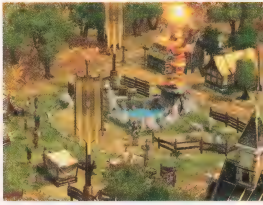
REVIEW

American RTS games divide and conquer with war-prone unit pluralities toting guns, slashing swords, or slinging magic. By contrast, European RTS games skew economically; they're still imperialistic empire builders, but methodologically roundabout: victory through globalization instead of annihilation.

Third in a series that's never received its due accolades, *1701 A.D.* is of the latter stripe, where your two- or three-unit military is good for stiff-arming sea pirates, but little else beyond. Instead, your goal is to colonize an island (on maps comprised of dozens) by building houses, markets, mines, farms, schools, and churches...and linking dozens more via roads and trade routes to whip bread-and-butter pioneers into kiss-my-ring aristocrats. Smiles or frowns gauge your progress as your citizens demand a broader and more opulent range of goods, which you must provide either domestically or—lacking the native resources—by trading with competitors.

If you've played prior games *1503* or *1602*, *1701's* big advance involves the usual 3D makeover, though its field of view feels slightly (though not brokenly) zoomed-in. You also get the "Lodge," which lets you spy on or sabotage opponent economies, something best tested against human players online...though you'll have to wrestle with the language barrier (the series is currently more popular abroad).

Otherwise, *Age of Empires* derivatives come and go, and every once in a while, it's nice to forgo fodder mobs and group-think lassos. Daisy-chaining raw resources to refined goods to end products hasn't been this gratifying in years. ● **Matt Peckham**



● **Clear your calendar, because a single sandbox session of *1701 A.D.* can last for days.**

BUILD HOUSES, MARKETS, SCHOOLS, AND CHURCHES...EVERY ONCE IN A WHILE, IT'S NICE TO FORGO FODDER MOBS AND GROUP-THINK LASSOS.

VERDICT

- **Vast and complex economic simulation; well-balanced economies; clever A.I.**
- **Over-zoomed field of view; small multiplayer opponent pool and language barriers.**

8/10

GOOD

Games for Windows

HEROES OF ANNIHILATED EMPIRES

It came from the random fantasy-word generator

PUBLISHER CDV Software DEVELOPER GSC Game World GENRE Real-Time Strategy/RPG AVAILABILITY Retail ESRB RATING Teen
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS 2GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 2.5GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard MULTIPLAYER 2-7 players VERSION REVIEWED Gold Master

REVIEW

You can safely judge this book by its cover: *Heroes of Annihilated Empires* is an gamerica fantasy RTS-meets-RPG as the name would imply, though it leans more heavily on the "RPG" than most other hybrids. Its linear campaign missions, your male hero can hold his own without the help of any backup army, but that's partly because your foes are duds with short attention spans. Maps contain pockets of monsters that you can essentially bathe to death—there are few battle spells and arrows, lack of a foe feet so they forget you and repeat.

Things get more interesting when you're given an RTS base to build, as missions have you do it every early and often, forcing you to watch multiple fronts. Outside the campaign, skirmish or choose from limited, themed, in the yet-lacking Crysis offer an improved tool in order to summon the units required for base-building, your hero must become a mutant for 30 minutes (he says the info box...it lives like forever), forcing you to choose RTS or RPG from the get-go. Interesting idea, but the RTS way proves superior, since your hero eventually emerges anyway.

GSC promises more chapters (this is allegedly part one of a trilogy), but that doesn't excuse the fact that *HOAE* feels unfinished: We get only three skirmish maps; the "comic style" cutscenes look like hastily doctored storyboards (poor stylistic decision or out-of-time afterthought?); and the game inexplicably lacks a speed slider to accelerate the frequent skill pans. Waiting five minutes for a troop-transport ship to navigate a sea of molasses is exactly as exciting as it sounds. ● **Sean Molloy**

● **Your zoom-level options are limited to "really far and angled so you can see the horizon" and "still pretty far, but more top-down."**

● **The campaign starts a boorish, egotistical, unlikable elf ranger named Elhant...A change from naive, egotistical, unlikable elf rangers.**

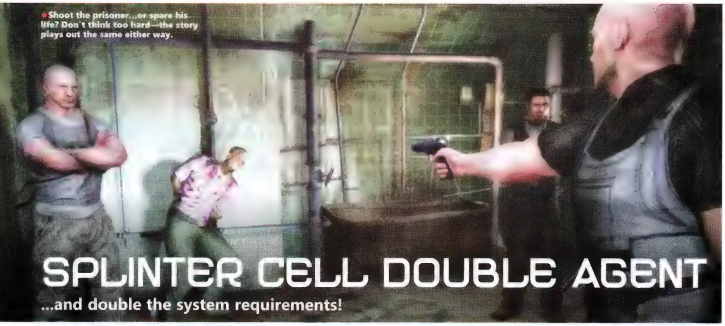
VERDICT

- **Tons of units onscreen; well-developed RPG aspect for hero units.**
- **StarForce copy protection; slow pace; dumb A.I. makes for tedious turtling.**

5/10

AVERAGE

Games for Windows



Shoot the prisoner...or spare his life? Don't think too hard—the story plays out the same either way.

SPLINTER CELL DOUBLE AGENT

...and double the system requirements!

PUBLISHER: Ubisoft DEVELOPER: Ubisoft GENRE: Stealth Action AVAILABILITY: Retail ESRB RATING: Mature
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 20GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard MULTIPLAYER: 2-8 players VERSION REVIEWED: Retail Box (v1.02 patch)

REVIEW

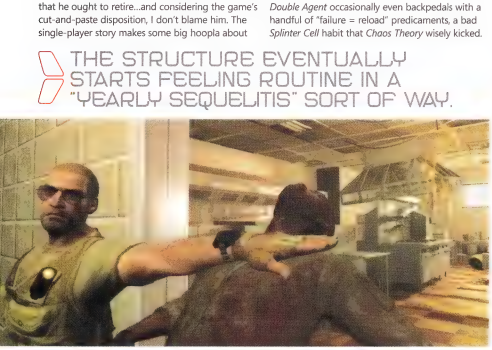
Got a tricked-out rig with plenty of RAM and a cutting-edge processor? If not, don't bother: *Double Agent*—the fourth Tom Clancy–branded stealth technothriller in as many years to bear the *Splinter Cell* name—chugs on anything less. And even if you *are* packing high-end components, don't expect a return visit to the stealth-action paradise that 2005's *Splinter Cell Chaos Theory* showed us.

Cynical series protagonist Sam Fisher (voiced once again by Michael "*Splinter Cell* Is My Career" Ironside) echoes my frustrations during *Double Agent*'s opening moments, sardonically remarking that he ought to retire...and considering the game's cut-and-paste disposition, I don't blame him. The single-player story makes some big hoopla about moral choices as Fisher goes undercover, ingratiating himself with a sinister terrorist group. The "tough" dilemmas you're faced with—kill/don't kill the hostage; blow up the ship/avert the explosion; and so on—influence a Trust meter that waxes and wanes between the NSA boys back home and the terrorist cell, but the gameplay consequences are nowhere near as critical as the back of the box implies. Don't kid yourself: *Double Agent*'s just another gauntlet of (mostly) linear missions.

OLD HABITS

That dim appraisal might still elicit an enthusiastic thumbs-up...if not for the advances that the aforementioned *Chaos Theory* made. At this point, we've already seen everything that this game offers—and *Double Agent* occasionally even backpedals with a handful of "failure = reload" predicaments, a bad *Splinter Cell* habit that *Chaos Theory* wisely kicked.

> THE STRUCTURE EVENTUALLY STARTS FEELING ROUTINE IN A "YEARLY SEQUELITIS" SORT OF WAY.



In all fairness, *Double Agent* doesn't *really* flub the stealth stuff. The missions that your criminal pals send you on (which take you from Mexico to Russia...and everywhere in between) excel at maintaining the series' trademark tension and instilling a sense of accomplishment when you successfully evade a sentry or exercise the Fifth Freedom with a few well-placed bullets. But without any clever new innovations on par with what came in the last two games—and with a lot of graphical stuttering (and the occasional crash)—the structure eventually starts feeling routine in a "yearly sequelitis" sort of way.

SPY GAMES

Conversely, I've *heard* from Xbox 360 owners that the spies-versus-mercs multiplayer mode (now in its third iteration) breaks plenty of routines, though you wouldn't know it from playing *Double Agent* on a PC. At the time of this writing, the multiplayer client remains effectively inoperable; attempting to join an online game simply returns an error message, and a cursory glance at Ubisoft's official forums reveals widespread problems.

And according to those forums, multiplayer's led a troubled existence even prior to the latest busted patch: Random midgame disconnections spoil the fun, and bonus gadgets earned during missions don't unlock properly. Perhaps the most vexing point of all, though, is the lack of a lobby or chat area. Then again, given the multiplayer client's rocky history (*Splinter Cell Pandora Tomorrow*'s multiplayer initially didn't function correctly without the aid of a fan-made patch), it's not exactly a huge shock. **Ryan Scott**

VERDICT

- **The stealth gameplay's still incredibly tense.**
- **Trust system underused; some stability issues; multiplayer has severe problems; beefy system requirements.**

5/10
AVERAGE
Games for Windows

PHANTASY STAR UNIVERSE

Lightweight fun

PUBLISHER: **Sega** DEVELOPER: **Sonic Team** GENRE: **Action-RPG** AVAILABILITY: **Retail, E-tail (www.phantasystaruniverse.com)** ESRB RATING: **Teen**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1.6GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 9GB hard drive space (gamepad and Internet connection recommended)** MULTIPLAYER: **2-6 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Retail Box**

REVIEW

In a throwback to a simpler era of online gaming (before everything went massive), Sega's *Phantasy Star Universe* invokes the spirit of predecessor *Phantasy Star Online*—while simultaneously making concessions to modern times, creating an online RPG that's great for people unwilling to invest in an extremely time-consuming MMO.

PSU's story mode provides ample training for what eventually awaits you online. The main character, Ethan Waber, is enlisted to all of the job-development Partner Machinery–aiding (P.M.s are A.I. "pets" that evolve according to the items you feed them) and item-synthesizing skills one needs on the live servers. While the story mode pales in comparison to the advanced storytelling pioneered by companies like BioWare and Obsidian, it's at least as compelling as what you'll find in an old-school dungeon crawler like *Diablo IV*.

In case you're not ready to take the game online, don't want to pay a monthly fee, or lack a decent Internet connection, the unlockable Extra mode simulates online-style gameplay, filling the gaps with recognizable NPC allies (think *Guild Wars* with futuristic anime scenery). While it's hardly a substitute for living, breathing teammates, it's still a noteworthy consideration for an online-centric RPG to offer. Most people who pick up PSU will no doubt venture into those deeper waters—and the fast-paced real-time combat (much speedier than PSO's sluggish fighting), class-swapping, item synthesis, six-player parties (up from PSO's four), and flexible customization options conspire to make a relaxed, enjoyable online RPG. ● **James Mielke**

It's definitely not the most graphically intensive game you'll play this season.

VERDICT

- **A nice variety of offline and online options; deeper customization than in *PSO*.**
- **Not the greatest-looking game; plot is from the ice age of 8-bit Japanese storytelling.**

8/10
GOOD
Games for Windows

D.I.R.T.: ORIGIN OF THE SPECIES

Where dirty girls play

PUBLISHER: **TH Synergy** DEVELOPER: **Nu Generation** GENRE: **Action** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Mature**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1GHz CPU, 512 MB RAM, 4GB hard drive space** MULTIPLAYER: **None** VERSION REVIEWED: **Near-Final Reviewable**

REVIEW

The central character in third-person shooter *D.I.R.T.: Origin of the Species* is a cute teenage girl with cute pigtails who carries a cute Japanimation-inspired teddy bear sweetly named "Mr. Boo" on her back. Mr. Boo is super-duper cute because he emotes—giggling like a baby when he's happy and crying when he's scared.

Mr. Boo cries a lot. Perhaps he cries because *D.I.R.T.*'s innocent facade camouflages substantially...errr, dirtier enticements. Virtually every female is portrayed as a stripper or clothed like a porn star, virtually every cut-scene is laced with profanity, and virtually every action sequence involves gratuitous bloodletting, splattered entrails, and exploited babes in dire peril. No, Mr. Boo, yours is most certainly *not* a cute, G-rated world.

It's not a highly polished world, either. Audio dropouts and end-of-clip clicks are commonplace. Enemies—mostly mutant bugs and evil GIs—are scripted and inconsistently responsive. And the game's scenery often allows appendages or entire dead bodies to poke right through.

Yet *D.I.R.T.* is surprisingly ambitious, too. It offers three modes (Stealth, Sharp Shooting, and Aggression), numerous levels and environments, and timed versus untimed play. It delivers the usual roster of big/bigger/biggest guns, but it also allows you to hurl objects, burn things, become invisible, and guide bullets around corners using psychokinetic powers. And it often asks you to think and devise plans more elaborate than "eradicate everything that moves." Too bad the whole thing comes off feeling cheesy, unfinished, and a bit perverted. Think of it as a B-movie in shooter form. ● **Gord Goble**

● **Nearly all the women wear high heels—not exactly the best shoes for escaping killer bugs.**

● ***D.I.R.T.*'s heroine, not coincidentally named "Dirt," squares off with a mishmash of evildoers while Mr. Boo goes face-to-face with the business end of a rifle.**

VERDICT

- **Clever weapons and powers; some degree of decision-making required.**
- **Problematic audio/visuals; scripted enemies; dubious portrayal of women.**

5/10
AVERAGE
Games for Windows

● A memorial to the mighty Fae heroes of the past...one day I'll have a statue, too!

EVERQUEST II: ECHOES OF FAYDWER

God-fearing Elf-lovers, rejoice!

PUBLISHER: Sony Online Entertainment DEVELOPER: Sony Online Entertainment GENRE: MMORPG RRP: TBC RELEASE: Retail, E-tail (everquest2.station.sony.com) ESRB RATING: Teen MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 10GB hard drive space, *EverQuest II* MULTIPLAYER: Massively so VERSION REVIEWED: Retail Box

REVIEW

***EverQuest II's* previous two expansions** added significant amounts of content to SOE's flagship MMORPG—but both were largely aimed at high-level players. *Echoes of Faydwer* breaks this trend, offering plenty of content for everyone. It's also the best *EQ2* expansion to date.

● **The city of Old Kelethin offers plenty of new quests for beginning players, including a Fae-specific quest to find "your calling."**

● **Queen Antonia might be hidden in her castle, but the Fae Queen Amrie is there for all who would seek an audience with her...providing she has no other pressing matters.**

EOF comes loaded with new features: The continent of Faydwer (which should be strikingly familiar to *EQ1* players) hosts over 20 zones, enough quests to progress from level 1 to 70 (without even peeking at the rest of the *EQ2* world), and a new playable race (the Fae—see sidebar for details). Secondary trade skills get expanded, too, with new transmutation and tinkering professions that provide more ways to rake in the gold. And in terms of bells and whistles, cloaks (a long-requested feature) can further customize your character's stats and appearance—in addition to looking cool, these items allow guilds to show off some customizable colors and heraldry.

FAMILIAR PLACES FOREVER CHANGED

EQ1 players will discover some pretty sweeping changes to the continent of Faydwer. The Dwarven city of Kaladim now teems with vicious Kobolds, Crushbone and its Orcish denizens rally against a new foe, and places like Castle Mistmoore and the Butcherblock Mountains help fill in part of the 500-year gap between *EQ1* and *EQ2*. It's pretty nostalgic to come back to Faydwer...and its inclusion is a nice nod to longtime *EQ* players.

Another equally nice nod: The gods, absent since the Shattering (a cataclysmic event that occurred prior to *EQ2*), return in *EOF*. Players can choose to devote themselves to a deity within their faction, which opens up new quests and powers that differ with each god. "Miracles" and "Blessings" can be purchased through Favor, itself earned as a reward for sacrificing items or completing certain quests. Becoming a follower of Tunare, for instance, grants Blessings that increase the potency of healing spells and offer strong attacks against evil creatures. Miracles and Blessings are quite powerful, balanced by short effect durations, long recast times, and high Favor cost. The whole system feels well implemented and adds a welcome new facet to *EQ2*'s gameplay.

> EQ1 PLAYERS WILL DISCOVER SOME PRETTY SWEEPING CHANGES TO THE CONTINENT OF FAYDWER.

The mother lode of content does beget a few annoyances—like vague quest descriptions and the fact that the engine *still* runs sluggishly, even on high-end systems—but it doesn't detract too much from the overall experience. *Echoes of Faydwer* is a no-brainer purchase for *EQ2* vets, and newcomers will find it a handy starting point. If following expansions meet the high standard this sets, the *EQ2* community is in store for a great future. ● **Allan Kaspar**

THESE WINGS ARE MADE FOR GLIDING

As far as *EOF*'s new Fae species is concerned, appearances count for quite a lot. These cute little winged buggers are the most customizable of *EQ2*'s races. The aforementioned appendages often more than just a cool new look, though: they allow characters to glide from great heights. This may not sound like much at first...but one (often fatal) misstep suffered while playing as any other race will make you appreciate a nice pair of wings.

VERDICT

+ Over 20 new zones; interesting new mechanics and playable race.

+ Several vague quest descriptions; engine still runs sluggishly on low-end PCs.

8/10

GOOD

Games for Windows

● If you happen to be the guy pictured at center, then this game is absolutely awesome.

ARCHLORD

EverQuest, meet *Highlander*

PUBLISHER: **Codemasters** DEVELOPER: **NHN** GENRE: **MMORPG** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Teen**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **800MHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 4GB hard drive space** MULTIPLAYER: **Massively so** VERSION REVIEWED: **Retail Box**

REVIEW

By their nature, MMOs ask a lot of their players, and we expect a lot in return. We're not just making a one-time purchase and losing ourselves for a few hours—we're moving into that world. We're creating imaginary lives, setting up shop, making friends, and spending weeks, months, or even years of our time in the place.

This is less like picking up a game and more like buying a summer home. When peanuts can get you a luxury place with a private beach, you're not terribly motivated to save money by vacationing in a ghetto. Sometimes it's better to just stay home... which is why *World of WarCraft* winds up holding half the population, with the rest split between several dozen other games that offer enough local color to draw their own niche community.

To be fair, and to torture the metaphor a little longer, *ArchLord* isn't exactly a slum; it's more of a low-income housing complex in a suburb of Detroit (especially when you consider the game's sudden switch to a fee-free subscription model two months after its U.S. launch). Not a hellish place—but stark, dull, and definitely something you've seen all over the landscape. It's got hot- and cold-running Elves, but that's about it for amenities.

● If you must put big, scary spikes all over your mount, we recommend *not* pointing them at the guy in the saddle.

THE OLD GRIND

You're not paying cash for it, but you *are* investing your vacation time. So what's the hook? When you've got graphics that look more like a manga reinterpretation of *Dark Age of Camelot* than a current-generation MMO, PVP that comes down to who carries the most red potions, and a 100-level grind of the sort that epitomizes Korean MMO design, there better be one hell of a carrot at the end of that stick.

That carrot is the titular ArchLord. At the end of 60 levels and a series of raids, one player attains godhood...more or less. The ruling ArchLord gets a castle, a dragon to ride around on, armor that makes him twice as tall as everyone else, the ability to control the weather, and the power to just generally kick great big bunches of ass. It's a great gig if you can get it—unfortunately, only one opening exists per server, until the ArchLord's three-week reign expires and somebody else gets a shot.

It's a pretty ludicrous system. It's nice to have something crazy to aspire to, you know, *on the side*. In this case, it's something so central that the game is actually named after it. *ArchLord* doesn't offer much else to do besides grind your way through the levels as yet another Gothic Lolita-looking moon elf, and aside from the poorly implemented rule-the-world gimmick, we're left playing a dated game with limited classes, a lot of grind, and a miniscule chance of something cool at the end if you really throw yourself into it. Not exactly our cup of mead. ● **Scott Sharkey**

> IT'S A GREAT GIG IF YOU CAN GET IT—UNFORTUNATELY, ONLY ONE OPENING EXISTS PER SERVER. UNTIL THE ARCHLORD'S THREE-WEEK REIGN EXPIRES AND SOMEBODY ELSE GETS A SHOT.

VERDICT

- **It's good to be the king.**
- **The game is about two years old—and it looks and plays like it's even older.**

4/10

BAD

Games for Windows

AGATHA CHRISTIE: MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS

I'd rather be in *Syberia*

PUBLISHER: **The Adventure Company** DEVELOPER: **AWE Games** GENRE: **Adventure** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Teen**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1.4GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 1.5GB hard drive space** MULTIPLAYER: **None** VERSION REVIEWED: **Gold Master**

REVIEW

Except for a few early text adventures from Infocom (*Deadline*, *Suspect*, *The Witness*), mystery-themed PC games tend to get bogged down in the boring minutiae of the detective's art—and it's the reason they aren't more popular. The Adventure Company may have thought to overcome this by licensing the work of Agatha Christie—a woman who could make even train timetables seem suspenseful—but alas, while the novel, film, and TV versions of *Murder on the Orient Express* were all gripping, the game is an object lesson in tedium.

Maybe some gamers enjoy trudging back and forth through the same half-dozen train corridors, questioning one suspect after another by cycling mechanically through a list of topics. Or gamers whose pulses quicken with excitement when, after painstakingly collecting fingerprints and passports from a dozen characters, they are told they missed one and have to find it—with no indication as to *which one* they missed. I doubt many gamers fall under these descriptions.

Express does offer some nice visuals, albeit not up to the standards of the *Syberia* games (the comparison's unavoidable—the last *Syberia* was also about a train traversing snowy climes), and for hardcore mystery aficionados, the game includes in-jokes such as locating a character's home at the site of New York's famous Mysterious Bookshop. But none of that makes up for the thuddingly hamhanded puzzles ("Find me my bacon or I leave the train"), foreign accents that would embarrass an old vaudevillian, and enough repetitive busywork to make Sisyphus weep.

Charles Ardai

All aboard the train...of boredom.

VERDICT

+ Some lovely visuals and music.

– Only if you were perforated by a power drill could you be more thoroughly bored.

2/10

TERRIBLE

Games for Windows

SECRET FILES: TUNGUSKA

Some mysteries don't need to be solved

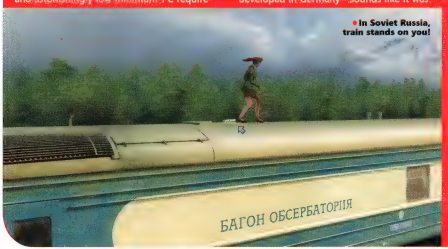
PUBLISHER: **The Adventure Company** DEVELOPER: **Fusionsphere Systems** GENRE: **Adventure** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Teen**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **500MHz CPU, 128MB RAM, 2GB hard drive space** MULTIPLAYER: **None** VERSION REVIEWED: **Retail Box**

REVIEW

***Secret Files: Tunguska* is an ode** to the point-and-click adventure games of yore—stories atop lovely pre-rendered backgrounds, a throwaway supermarket-novel plot seemingly meant for a *Gabriel Knight* game, and astonishingly low minimum-PC requirements. It benefits from charming anachronism: Here's a great-looking game clearly intended for women 35 and under, for gals raised on a niche genre that's now all but dead. And as for the presentation, the adventure-game GUI's never been more intuitive or impressively elegant. It's a tour.

But charm can only go so far. The game—developed in Germany—sounds like it was localized in a tin can, starring a voice cast of *Doctor Who* rotoscreen villains. You can turn these annoying voices off in the menu, but doing so only underscores the dialogue's shoddiness. The puzzles themselves are overcomplicated, yet insultingly menial: I liked making poisoned blow darts just fine...but why have me globe-trot to exotic locales only to make jam from scratch?

The absurdity of the puzzles borders on genre parody, from wan frantic inventory item-mashing (it's nigh impossible to keep up with *Tunguska*'s special brand of crazy without resorting to a walkthrough—and, as any adventure-game vet knows, walkthroughs are the ultimate bummer. Nostalgia-driven genre geeks (and few others) might get something out of this, if they can learn to live with the shortcomings. **Jane Frank**



In Soviet Russia, train stands on you!

VERDICT

+ Great adventure-game interface, from hot spots to inventory; beautifully detailed environments.

– Crazy puzzles; atrocious localization.

5/10

AVERAGE

Games for Windows

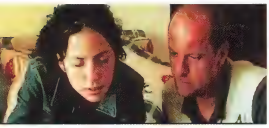
EVIDENCE: THE LAST RITUAL

Blurring the thin line between stupid and clever

PUBLISHER: **The Adventure Company** DEVELOPER: **Lexis Numerique** GENRE: **Adventure** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Mature**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **800MHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 2.5GB hard drive space, Internet connection** MULTIPLAYER: **None** VERSION REVIEWED: **Gold Master**

REVIEW

Without the Internet, this game doesn't exist. Not because the clues to the puzzles in this serial killer stalker are found on websites or because the game will bomb you with about 60 to 70 e-mails...but because completing the game is impossible without the assistance of the good folks at forums.adventuregamers.com, who've solved most of the insanely obscure puzzles in the game. Take away that online safety net and you're as screwed as the 12 whimpering victims the killer dismembers in *Evidence*.



● **"Jack?" "Yes, Manuela?" "Look right there! Is that another excruciating foray into frustration masquerading as entertainment?" "Yes, *mi amor*, I believe it is." "Ah...how I long for the sweet release of death."**

This sequel to *Missing: Since January* totally sours any goodwill that game might have generated. The confusing and convoluted story itself unfolds through lengthy e-mails, verbose websites, and plenty o' video clips (which frequently hold fly-speck-sized clues) that reward you and prolong the torment when you solve puzzles. For example, one of the more forthright sequences assumes that you'll notice a name on the T-shirt of a character wandering through one video for three seconds. That might lead you to a website and then to a blog. In French. Within the two years' worth of blog entries is a reference—in French—to a cat named Confucius. You then need to find the birth/death date of Confucius (the real one, not the cat...though that wouldn't be unexpected) and enter them via the tiny game interface to solve a puzzle. *Evidence* is that rare game that makes *Gabriel Knight 3*'s infamously bad cat moustache puzzle seem both logical and appealing by comparison. ● **Robert Coffey**

● **The biggest threat this woman faces isn't the killer...but rather your summoning up the energy to decipher yet another code.**

VERDICT

- **A truly unique take on adventure gaming.**
- **A truly excruciating take on adventure gaming.**

4/10

BAD

Games for Windows

Thrilling performance at 3200dpi

It's here. The answer to your high-performance dreams. Meet the new Saitek GM3200 laser mouse. Created to put the perfect blend of intelligent design and innovative features at your fingertips for perfect control. With a true top speed of 3200 dpi this is no ordinary mouse. Laser guided optics, adjustable weights and changeable Teflon feet provide precise accuracy like never before. While its ultra relaxed finger hugging contours mean hours of thrilling performance in absolute comfort. Add to this 7 buttons and 9 super-cool pulsating LEDs and you'll be flying through everything that gets in your way with the greatest of pleasure.

GM3200 Laser Mouse *Also available in Blue!*

Saitek™

www.saitekusa.com

SPACE EMPIRES V

Greatness may have to wait for a few more patches

PUBLISHER: **Strategy First** DEVELOPER: **Malfador Machinations** GENRE: **Strategy** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Everyone**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **500MHz CPU, 64MB RAM, 500MB hard drive space** MULTIPLAYER: **2-8 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Retail disc**

REVIEW

Though far too inhospitable for casual players—its learning curve is steep enough to make Lance Armstrong weep—*Space Empires V* is still impressive. Had it not shipped with a long list of alarming and perplexing bugs, the game would make a great new obsession for 4X strategy enthusiasts everywhere. It may someday fulfill that potential, but for now, it's a work in progress.

And that's a pity. With fantastic depth, complex diplomatic tools, mouth-watering spaceship customization possibilities, and compelling multiplayer capability, *Space Empires V* is the kind of game that I'd normally allow to consume massive and nonrefundable hunks of my life. That is, if I weren't constantly worried about my hard work getting trashed by the game's next critical, undiscovered bug. Like a lover who's cheated before, the game can't be entirely trusted to perform as promised...and that alone is fatal.

> LIKE A LOVER WHO'S CHEATED BEFORE, THE GAME CAN'T BE ENTIRELY TRUSTED TO PERFORM AS PROMISED.

Unfortunately, *Space Empires V* shipped with many such critical flaws. Naturally happy races would—before a recent patch—suffer inexplicably low happiness, while naturally depressed races were surprisingly sunny, due to mistakenly reversed attributes. Oops! The developer speedily remedied this and other gaffes, but I fear what else lurks deep within the bowels of *Space Empires V*'s impressively (yet perilously) intricate plumbing.

If all the major problems are ironed out, *Space Empires V* will become much more attractive. Keep your eyes on the developer's website for patches and bug fixes; if the issues are minor and lists continue to shrink, you can probably feel safe investing in this very ambitious and intricate—but imperfect—game.

● **Greg Kramer**

● **It's not just a game—it's a spaceship Erector set.**

VERDICT

+ **Expansive military, commercial, diplomatic, and intel options.**

– **Hard to learn; not for casual players; a number of severe bugs.**

5/10
AVERAGE
Games for Windows

BRIGADE E5: NEW JAGGED UNION

Another reason to hate unions

PUBLISHER: **Strategy First/1C** DEVELOPER: **Apeiron** GENRE: **Small-Squad Tactical Combat** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Mature**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **2GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 2GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **None** VERSION REVIEWED: **Retail Box**

REVIEW

In case you don't remember, one of the best game series of the 1990s was an intricate, turn-based, tactical extravaganza by the name of *Jagged Alliance*. In a misguided—or simply ass-poor—attempt at resurrecting that grand old warhorse, Russian designer Apeiron now spews forth *Brigade E5: New Jagged Union*.

With a title ripped from the tiresome, this tactical combat debacle goes wrong from the launch screen. The "extensive tutorial" doesn't work, the character-creation mechanism is totally unexplained, and the combat system features a large number of useless soldiers. The thrust of the thing: You're a man of mystery, recently released from prison in a small, humid nation, out to make your fortune as a mercenary. You'll recruit other equally mysterious individuals to help in the fight for the side of your choice (corrupt government officials, misunderstood rebels, or drug dealers).

> THIS TACTICAL-COMBAT DEBACLE GOES WRONG FROM THE LAUNCH SCREEN.

Of course, its matter which side you link up with, your real enemies are always soldiers from a place I like to call Morons. Bad guys commonly walk into each others' lines of fire, exit perfectly good defiladies for no reason, or hibate firefights while they're all clumped together in the middle of an open plaice. Meanwhile, your allies require constant micromanagement to avoid making the same silly takes. And as the subject of avoiding things, make sure to avoid shelling out any dough to anyone selling *Brigade E5*. You'll be glad you did. ● **Eric Neigher**

● **These guys can at least take comfort that no one will be able to see their faces and identify them with *Brigade E5*.**

VERDICT

+ **Attempt at bringing back a fantastic old series is praiseworthy; detailed arsenal.**

– **Guffaw-inducing A.I.; "aghast-from-the-past" graphics; erratic difficulty.**

3/10
BAD
Games for Windows

NEED FOR SPEED CARBON

Fast and furious, but ultimately a bit dull

PUBLISHER: Electronic Arts DEVELOPER: EA Black Box GENRE: Racing AVAILABILITY: Retail ESRB RATING: Everyone
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1.7GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 5.3GB hard drive space (driving wheel recommended) MULTIPLAYER: None VERSION REVIEWED: Retail Box

REVIEW

For all its metal-crumpling mayhem, all its dripping-with-style elegance, all its Hollywood-inspired FMV-meets-CGI cut-scenes, and all its tricked-out car modifications, *Need for Speed Carbon*—the latest annual revision of Electronic Arts' seemingly eternal street racing juggernaut—doesn't present a great *driving* challenge. Vehicle physics are simplistic and sloppy, the roadways are too narrow, and the initially thrilling racing routine inevitably feels repetitive. Sure, *Carbon* packs in enough raw speed and cop/racer/innocent motorist pileups for any street punk, but you inevitably spend nearly as much time careening—and often destroying—scenery as you do testing your racing skills.

● **Grabbing air time during hot pursuits is a *Carbon* staple.**

That may not matter to *NFS* addicts, though; in *Carbon*, EA ups the intrigue by delivering three distinct classes of car (muscle, exotic, and tuner), each of which thankfully embodies a unique driving experience. It supplants the so-so drag-racing component of last year's *NFS Most Wanted* with equally so-so "drifting races," wherein he who skids the most through a series of snaking turns wins. And it adds a new wrinkle in the form of a "wingman," a teammate who blocks or finds shortcuts for you...but in practice, it's startlingly ineffective. The game's new Autosculpt feature is a car fabricator's dream come true, and its city and canyon venues look as pretty as—but no prettier than—prior editions.

Taken in small slices, *Carbon*'s sub-15-hour career mode and abundant alternate gameplay modes provide a thunderous, explosive hoot. But if you wince at the thought of automotive pinball, or if you've experienced other recent versions of the game, skip it. ● **Gord Goble**

VERDICT

7\10

GOOD

Games for Windows

Sophisticated "movie-in-a-game" presentation; incredible array of car mods.

Improbable physics; not terribly removed from previous *Need for Speeds*.

REACH NEW HEIGHTS

NEW X52 PRO

The new **X52 Pro**, features a collection of meticulously refined features that not only deliver the most precise and dynamic flight control but also give you innovative tools for unlimited programmability and superior performance. Every detail from the improved iMFD display and heavy-duty military spec components to the intuitive controls and strong durable ergonomically designed body put you in command of the most realistic flying system. And with its gorgeous metal trims, dials and finishes, not only is the **X52 Pro** a vision of powerful beauty, it is also an advanced mechanical masterpiece that will take you to new heights.

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● *Hammers of Fate* is more polished, but still has bad design choices like transparency effects in skills and abilities screens that make them difficult to read.

HEROES OF MIGHT AND MAGIC V: HAMMERS OF FATE

Thud-thud-thud goes the hammer...

PUBLISHER: Ubisoft DEVELOPER: Nival Interactive GENRE: Turn-Based Strategy AVAILABILITY: Retail Box, E-tail (www.direct2drive.com) ESRB RATING: Teen
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1.5GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 2GB hard drive space, *Heroes of Might and Magic V* MULTIPLAYER: 2-8 players VERSION REVIEWED: Retail Box

REVIEW

What *Heroes of Might and Magic V* needed in order to rate first-class (instead of merely mediocre) was a serious delousing. Six months later, we've received four megapatches that cumulatively fixed zingers like random freeze-ups, multiplayer fritzing, bad math, loopy camera antics, and a hundred other nits that altogether spelled "hold on to your wallets." Props where props are due: Patched, *HOMM5* is—as we predicted—a much better game that holds up favorably against series favorite *HOMM3*. So how about a great expansion pack to reintroduce things?

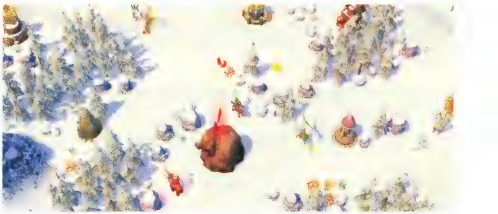
Or maybe not. Instead, how about that freely downloadable überpatch, plus three protracted, disorderly campaigns, one humdrum new faction, and a few desirable (if overdue) features like a random map generator and caravans. Yep, sad to say...but *Hammers of Fate* turns out to be *Might and Magic* middlesville, part two.

FATEFULLY FLAT

The design team gets a nod for trying, at least. Those three campaigns altogether add up to 15 marathon operations with considerably fewer flinch-inducing cut-scenes. And yet, hotfooting heroes down narrow terrain corridors and mopping up loot never seemed duller. You don't touch the new Dwarf faction until the second campaign and instead have to futz with Haven for five soporific missions that deal with civil war in the Griffin Empire. Those missions are a breeze, but they feel practically purgatorial as you inch for hours toward possible salvation in the second act.

But when you get there, the Dwarves and their new town type (the Fortress) end up all wet, a seventh unit hodgepodge that's more an overpowered spin on the Academy. You get your low-end pawns like defenders and spear-wielders for rote hack-n-shoot tactics, your midgrade fielders like bear riders and brawlers for cavalry charges or casual slugging, and the obligatory high-level tanks like thanes and dragons with hip lightning- and fire-based attacks—in other words, "been there, yawned that."

The story and objectives never step up to compensate, and while the Fortress visuals are eye-catching, that's really all you can say about the Dwarves in terms of novelty. The only notable additive is rune magic (i.e., the Dwarf way of casting spells), which allows your hero to gradually improve abilities that use resources in lieu of mana points. It's not enough to redeem the faction...but makes it an early-game magic force to reckon with.



● **While it's smarter on the whole, the A.I. can still be ridiculously indecisive, retracing paths it already took and sidling into resource-sapped areas it already visited.**

CREATURE FEATURE

It's not all yawns and ho-hums, though. Caravans aren't new to the series, but they're certainly welcome, and they allow you to set up automatic creature delivery trains and—since caravans can be destroyed midpassage—simultaneously add a provocative multiplayer logistic. You also get a random-map generator, which frankly should've been released for free alongside the editor (which *was* free). Too bad it occasionally mislabels power-ups... and drops bases right next to each other. Whoops.

Hammers of Fate could be a great expansion with smarter, tougher solo missions. As it stands, it's an overpriced box of carrots that belonged in the game the first time around. ● **Matt Peckham**

VERDICT

6/10

AVERAGE

Games for Windows

+ Random-map generator; creature caravans; Dwarf faction's rune magic.

– Three generic campaigns; new faction barely stands out; too many bugs.

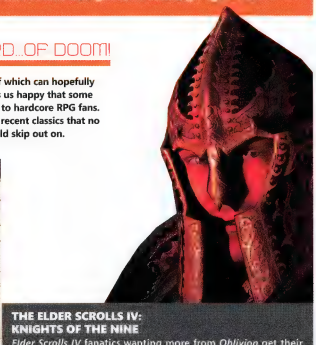
> YEP, SAD TO SAY...BUT *HAMMERS OF FATE* TURNS OUT TO BE *MIGHT AND MAGIC* MIDDLESVILLE, PART TWO.

THE HOT LIST

Five still-available games to buy right now

4 BROADSWORD...OF DOOM!

For all its faults (most of which can hopefully be fixed), *Gothic 3* makes us happy that some developers out there still cater to hardcore RPG fans. Here are a few other relatively recent classics that no self-respecting roleplayer should skip out on.



THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: KNIGHTS OF THE NINE

Elder Scrolls IV fanatics wanting more from *Oblivion* get their wish in this mini-expansion. *Knights of the Nine* introduces a handful of new quests and the titular Knights of the Nine faction, amounting to 15-plus additional hours of gameplay—perfect for everyone who's already discovered every nook and cranny of the original game. And as an added bonus, you get all of the other downloadable bells and whistles made available since *Oblivion*'s release, from Thieves' Den to Horse Armor.

BALDUR'S GATE II: THE COLLECTION

If you've got about 400 hours to kill between now and when BioWare lets loose Dragon Age in 2009 or so, then pick up this box set of Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn and its expansion, Throne of Bhaal. The Baldur's Gate series still remains one of the most satisfying translations of Dungeons & Dragons ever put to pixels, with smart tactical combat, witty dialogue, lavish production values, and tons and tons of side quests—all stuff that would eventually become BioWare's trademark.

FABLE: THE LOST CHAPTERS

Hoity-toity game designer Peter Molyneux is well-known for grand ideas that never translate quite right to actual games (see *Black & White* for ample proof), but *Fable* probably marks his most successful attempt since *Dungeon Keeper* at crafting something compelling. Think of it as *Oblivion* v0.5: Moral dilemmas, freeform character development, and a largely autonomous world underscore a far-reaching plot that you can follow or ignore at your leisure. It comes apart a bit at the seams if you look too close...but by and large, *Fable*'s a fun way to lose yourself in fantasyland.

FREEDOM FORCE VS. THE 3RD REICH

Comic geeks always tend to get shafted by the horrible *Superman* and *X-Men* games that get churned out on a regular basis. Developer Irrational Games took a different route with *Freedom Force* and its sequel, crafting its own superheroic characters that defend a world inspired by the Silver Age of comics. Beautiful cel-shaded graphics underscore *3rd Reich*'s deep turn-based RPG/strategy gameplay, and multiple heroes and superpowers mean tons of replayability.

STAR WARS: KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC

If you still need something to convince that rusty pompeii whopy of yours, ACTION with a stellar Star Wars story that many diehard fans label the best since *Empire Strikes Back*. This BioWare-developed RPG unfolds some 4,000 years prior to the films, and puts you in the shoes of a would-be Jedi Knight whose recent decisions affect the story's direction. The Force is with you...or something.

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Game names in yellow indicate *GFW* Editors' Choice award-winners

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Extend

Where your games live on forever!

Tom's warp-lightning cannons are bringing up the rear, behind the rat ogres and giant rats.

> HASN'T ANYONE IN HUNGARY READ J.R.R. MARTIN?

Giant rats vs. Prussian knights = flatbread rats.

Rats. Oh. Rats. Zillions of them!

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Garry's Mod 10 is out—find out why it's definitely worth your $10.

TOM vs. BRUCE

Two gamers enter. One gamer wins.

WARHAMMER: MARK OF CHAOS

Hey, who put Orcs in our football game?

PUBLISHER: **Namco Bandai** DEVELOPER: **Black Hole Entertainment** GENRE: **Real-Time Strategy** ESRB RATING: **M**

• **Fashion sense is a vital part of *Warhammering*.**

RAT RACE

TOM: In my years as a professional real-time strategy gamer, I've played all sort of races. Zergs, Elves, bug people, terrorists, the French. But I've never played rodents. So I was pretty excited to do the latest *Warhammer: Mark of Chaos* with Bruce. It lets you play as rats, something I've never done. So I'll be the Skaven, a race of rat-men with an elaborate backstory that you can read on Wikipedia if you want.

BRUCE: I have to admit that I find the *Warhammer* universe intriguing. The Teutonic Knights went into space, where they founded a pseudo-Prussian empire based on theology, plate mail, and energy weapons. They also found their Poles and Lithuanians, who are the Orcs and Eldar. You can decide which is which.

TOM: Actually, this isn't the *Warhammer 40,000 AD* universe. That's *Dawn of War*. *Mark of Chaos* is an RTS developed by Black Hole, a group of Hungarians, and published by Namco Bandai, the folks behind *Ridge Racer*. It uses the *Warhammer* fantasy setting.

BRUCE: Huh. I guess that explains all these stupid Elves. I'm not sure why anyone would want to pollute a perfectly good Gothic space universe with *Lord of the Rings* creatures. Sure, you can spell Orcs with a "k" and it's like all in the future and stuff, but please—no lasers? What's the point? Why not just call it *Battle for Middle-earth III*, split the difference with EA, and go home? Hasn't anyone in Hungary read J.R.R. Martin?

TOM: We were going to play the *Dark Crusade* expansion for *Dawn of War*. That has lasers. It also adds the Tau and the Necrons. Bruce was pretty excited until I explained that they're Necrons, not Neocons. When he gave me a blank look, I explained that one was a group of soulless fanatical automatons intent on dominating the known universe and the other was a race in the *Warhammer* mythos. Bruce said that was a pretty good one, even though he could see the punch line coming down Fifth Avenue. He said maybe I could sell it to the guys who do that *Penny Arcade* cartoon. Anyway, a *Dawn of War* match would have made for a pretty dull article considering how good I've gotten at it. I figured that since *Mark of Chaos* plays like the *Total War* games, I might not bury Bruce entirely.

BRUCE: Imre Nagy was only given a proper burial in 1989, 33 years after Tom's friends from Moscow made their own mark of chaos on Hungary. Weird how history repeats itself on the 50th anniversary.

TOM: Once again, I have no idea what Bruce is talking about, but Imre Nagy does sound like the name of a hero or something. However, they don't have Hungary in *Warhammer*.

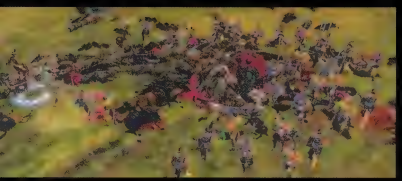
BRUCE: If Tom wins, it's like the Soviets invading Hungary all over again.

TOM: I hear Bruce is against Soviets in gaming. You raised a stink about having Stalin in *Civilization IV*, didn't you?

BRUCE: What I'm really against is all that miniatures painting. I've never been to any gaming conventions, but the people who have assure me that you can find a lot of painted miniatures there. The whole idea of miniatures is of fussing over whether your great swordsmen have yellow shirts and purple pants, or purple shirts and yellow pants, or maybe even pants that have yellow and purple at the same time. As long as you have both yellow and purple paint, it's up to you! This kind of individualism wouldn't be possible under Tom's repressive, Moscow-backed regime, so it's good that *Warhammer* was invented after the Velvet Revolution freed Eastern European miniatures collectors to use whatever paints they wanted.

TOM: It's an important part of *Warhammering*. The developers of *Warhammer: Mark of Chaos* know this, so they let us paint our armies. We can go into a customization screen and change the colors of various components on our units.

BRUCE: I'm playing as the Empire, which is basically a group of knights from East Prussia charged with ridding the universe of all non-Catholic >



• The warp-lightning cannons are Tom's last line of attack.

monsters. Since I'm pretty sure rats aren't Catholics, this means Tom is marked for death.

TOM: First, I give my rat ogres a mulberry shoulder wrap and girdle, complemented by a tasteful dark smoke heather face wrap and a river-blue loincloth. I can't quite get the color right on the shoulder wraps, which ends up being a bit more spice than mulberry. The whole ensemble says, "I'm here to pound the living daylights out of you, but that doesn't mean I can't look stylish doing it."

I take extra time with my Skaven warlord, whom I've named Ben. You can't actually name your heroes in *Warhammer: Mark of Chaos*, but that won't stop me from naming them in real life. I try several different outfits on Ben, but eventually settle on some really nice winter colors inspired by this year's Eddie Bauer Holiday Collection: peony shreds of cloth hanging from the standard mounted on his back, a dusty lilac tattered cloak, and a buttercream ankle-length skirt. It's the perfect outfit for tearing it up on the battlefield. Very fetching and I think it will play well in Milan, and maybe even Paris.

BRUCE: Because this is *Warhammer*, the first thing I have to decide is not what weapons to use against Tom, but how to dress up. What colors go with Panther Knights and greatswords? It's chaos!

TOM: *Mark of Chaos*, true to its name, is pretty chaotic. We've played a few test games, which involved a lot of name-calling and lingering resentment (against the game, not each other). Once a battle starts, it's nearly impossible to tell who's doing what to whom. And as for controlling what's going on, forget it. There are dozens of little spells and abilities to keep track of, most of them with inconsequential effects. So we've agreed to play in the style of Electric Football.

BRUCE: If you're not acquainted with Electric Football, here's how it works: You place a team of plastic miniatures on a metal board that's painted to look like a football field. Then you flip a switch that makes the metal vibrate. This sends the players shuffling around. If the quarterback is touched by someone from the other team, he's been tackled. If he enters the end zone, you've scored a touchdown.

Although there are Electric Football tournaments and conventions, for the most part, it's all very random. You have no real way of controlling your little players, who just shuffle around aimlessly. So it's all a matter of setting up your team and then just hoping for the best.

TOM: Since I'm the professional here, I've convinced Bruce that this is the best way to approach *Mark of Chaos*, which might as well be the Electric Football of real-time strategy games. We will create our armies and set them up on the map. Then, when the game starts, we'll select all our units by pressing Control-A, and give them an attack move to the far side of the map. After that, it's hands-off. We'll just see what happens.

BRUCE: Tom is cheating a little bit, since both electricity and football were invented by the U.S. of America. That should put him at a significant disadvantage even before we start. Since this makes it statistically more likely that I will win, I'm completely fine with that.

TOM: My strategy is to have three lines of attack. My front line will consist of 200 rats. I have five squads of giant rats, upgraded from 20 units each to 40 units each. The second line will be three enormous rat ogres. I've given them each level 3 armor and level 2 weapons. The third line of attack will be warp-lightning cannons upgraded to level 3 weaponry for extra punch.

The giant rats will crash into Bruce's army at about the same time the warp-lightning cannons start firing. Then the rat ogres will wade into battle. If you've ever seen *Willard*, it will be like the scene where a screaming Ernest Borgnine is covered in rats. Bruce will be playing the role of Ernest Borgnine.

BRUCE: *Warhammer* has two resources you can spend on troops: gold and population. The two are semi-independent of each other, so the first trick is getting as many of the best troops available, and the second trick is upgrading these troops with various role-playing stratagems like spells and magic items. A lot of it seems pretty sketchy to me, so I just upgrade everybody to be the best that they can be, which is how it is in America's Army.

My army has heroes called electors, which Tom's army could not have because Communists do not have elections. I give them a lot of powers, like liberty and freedom, plus fireballs for when liberty and freedom aren't enough. However, since this is Electric Football and I won't be able to actually fire off their fireballs, my electors will have to rely on their passive powers of liberty and freedom.

I also have a warrior priest for spreading the religion of the Teutonic Knights, which if you recall from the beginning of this story were transported here from medieval Prussia to build castles and fight Elves. If I were going to join a religious order, one that was devoted to fighting elves would be my first choice.

TOM: Ben is 40th level, which means he has lots of points to spend on the skill tree. I devote a lot of points to meeting the requirements for

● Electric Football is all about carefully setting up your units.

Screaming Death ("Filled with the tense fervor of the Horned Rat, he gets magic and morale immunity for a while, and increases damage inflicted"). For duels, Ben gets Skavenbrew ("a concoction of warpstone and blood").

Now I realize that actually using a hero's special abilities isn't quite in the spirit of playing like Electric Football. In some circles, this might be considered cheating. But one important feature of Electric Football was a little figure that could kick or pass the ball. You could pull back a spring-loaded foot or throwing arm and fling a little chunk of felt that represented the ball. This was how you modeled kicking or passing, which no football game should be without. This is very much like using a hero unit's spell powers, right? I consider this an entirely legitimate loophole.

Besides, I can't help but think how much richness would be added to a game of *Warhammer: Mark of Chaos* by including a Skaven warlord drunk on Skavenbrew and filled with the tense fervor of the Horned Rat. That's something you don't see every day and I'd hate for you guys to miss it. Plus, I've purchased some Major Healing Potions that will go to waste if I don't take control of Ben and tell him to drink his potions before getting killed.

BRUCE: When the game starts, I see that my Knights and whatnot are already arranged into some semblance of a formation. That's good enough for me. I click End Deployment.

TOM: I arrange everyone very carefully into their three lines of attack. I click the End Deployment button, select my units, and give them an attack move to the other side of the map. May the best man/rat win.

BRUCE: I enter the three commands Tom told me about: Control-A to select all the units, then A for attack-move, then left-click on the far side of the map to send my units there. That's how Electric Football works. Now it's all up to my electors. Speaking of which, I think there is a thing about the Teutonic Knights on the History Channel right now.

TOM: As our armies draw near each other, I see that Bruce has arranged some cavalry on the flanks. He's also got four heroes mixed in with his main melee fighters. That's some pretty clever tactical finesse. While his heroes help anchor the main fighting force, his cavalry will work their way around the edges, eventually moving on my warp-lightning cannons. I should have expected that he'd have something like that up his sleeve.

BRUCE: There is a famous scene in Sergei Eisenstein's film *Alexander Nevsky* where the Teutonic Knights go crashing through the ice of a frozen lake, onto which they ride out to do battle. I hope Tom doesn't have that built into his army, or deck, or whatever he has.

TOM: Bruce's heroes are in the middle of the battle, killing my giant rats. If most RPGs are to be believed, this is a favorite pastime of fantasy heroes. But here comes Ben, my Skaven warlord, to turn the tables. By carefully engaging first his priest, then his two electors, and finally his commander in battle, I kill them all by carefully using Ben's duel abilities. Between duels, I use Ben's area attack to carve out some of Bruce's melee fighters. I end up using all four of Ben's healing potions in the process.

BRUCE: Oh, it looks like that Teutonic Knights show is on tomorrow. Tonight is just the Bears game.

TOM: Unfortunately, it seems like my rats are pretty weak. They're getting thinned out quickly, and Bruce has cleverly kept some archers in the back who are clobbering my rat ogres. It's not looking good. What's more, my rats' morale is dropping fast. I've already had several units separate from the battle and flee toward a map edge.

BRUCE: What's the deal with Rex Grossman, anyway? He started out great and now all he does is throw interceptions. I'm glad he's not on my Electric Football team.

TOM: Bad news. I just lost Ben. Although I've taken out all of Bruce's heroes, his Empire units are just too hardy. They've decimated my giant rats, my rat ogres have been done in by ranged units, and now his cavalry are riding down my warp-lightning cannons. I think there's a reason most real-time strategy games don't have rats as a playable race.

BRUCE: I hope our Electric Football war is over by now. Sure enough, when I check the computer, there's a screen that tells me Tom has suffered 267 losses and I've only suffered 92. Nobody found any gold or items. I quit out of the game and promptly uninstall it. Hungarians everywhere rejoice. ●

FINAL SCORE

TOM: 92 **BRUCE: 267**

Tom Chick

In addition to being one of the video-game industry's most prolific freelance critics, Tom Chick also runs the popular website Quarter2Three.com.

Bruce Geryk

GFW contributor Bruce Geryk has written about videogames for over 20 years. He loves war games like most people love oxygen.

LINE OF ATTACK

Your monthly guide to hardcore war-gaming

COLUMN

I got an interesting e-mail this month from a reader trying to find an appropriate war game for his father, whom he described as an "old-time board gamer" with "magnetic wall maps." Trying to answer his question got me thinking about how there really aren't many "introductory computer war games" like the *Panzer General* series anymore. But is *Panzer General* really appropriate for someone who once had magnetic wall maps? That sounds like someone who would dive right into *Korsun Pocket* or a game from HPS Simulations. Or does it?

People come to computer war-gaming with different backgrounds—while it might seem obvious that a "complex" game like *Steel Panthers* would make a good first choice for someone with years of *Squad Leader* experience but bad for somebody expecting *Company of Heroes*, what isn't obvious is how expectations and tastes change when moving from board games to the PC. These are two distinct experiences, and many board-gamers I knew who loved the little colorful cardboard counters were decidedly unimpressed with the experience of pushing these around in digital form. A close friend was once a Napoleonic fanatic, collecting and playing all manner of games from a dozen publishers, and gleefully arranging stacks of Old Guard around Leipzig. Now? He'll take *Battle for Middle-earth II* over anything with hexes, thanks.

I love strategy games in general, and war games in particular. I really appreciate the board-gamey touches that a company like SSG incorporates into its products, because for me, that's a familiar and comforting paradigm. But I also realize that hex-game nostalgia isn't enough to drive a hobby. Taking these gamers for granted risks losing those who are no longer willing to see the computer as just a way to keep the cat from knocking over the counters. ● **Bruce Geryk**

● **What was once fine in cardboard...**

● **...suddenly seems to fall short of the imagination.**

Bruce Geryk

Hexes or interactive 3D environments, cardboard pieces or 2D sprites—when it comes to strategy games, Bruce doesn't discriminate.

FALLING PIECES

The best in casual games

COLUMN

I believe it was René Descartes who sagaciously noted, "What are words for? When no one listens anymore?" This observation predated his prescient observations regarding class status and the lack of pedestrianism in Los Angeles, but I digress—what really matters is that, if nothing else, words are goods for games...and even more, *Bookworm Adventures* is great for word games.

Bookworm Adventures (available over at www.popcap.com) is no sequel; rather, it spins off from the original *Bookworm*. Lex, the heroic and eponymous bookworm of the original, embarks on a series of lexicographically inspired adventures, fighting myriad enemies with the power of words. Yes—the power of words. Damage in the game's constant combat derives from the length of the words you construct from a jumble of letters in the center of the screen. Particularly impressive (i.e., long) words generate gems on the board, which you can use to freeze, burn, or otherwise amplify the damage inflicted on Lex's enemies. RPG elements exist in the form of experience gained in battle, which lets Lex beef up his attack, defense, and hit points. The RPG stylings carry even further, as you collect potions and items at the end of each level that you can equip prior to a quest, providing a number of inventive bonuses. *Bookworm Adventures* is much deeper than the average word game, and possibly even more addictive than *Bookworm*—kiss your free time goodbye.

● **Higher-level enemies enjoy a host of intrinsic bonuses and advantages, perfect for squashing little green worms.**

● **Could I have any more vowels in my *Scrabble* tray? Criminy!**

And to better devastate your enemies in *Bookworm Adventures*, you might want to beef up your anagramming skills with the father of all word games, *Scrabble 2007* ($20 at retail). The classic crossword game plays great on the PC, offering a stiff challenge across several difficulty levels. It just might expand your vocabulary...unless you're the sort of person who routinely works "qoph" into conversations. ● **Robert Coffey**

BOOKWORM ADVENTURES IS POSSIBLY EVEN MORE ADDICTIVE THAN THE ORIGINAL *BOOKWORM*.

Robert Coffey

Robert is the sort of person who routinely works "qoph" into conversations.

CRISIS ON INFINITE SERVERS

Trekking across the vast MMORPG landscape

This month: *City of Heroes*

COLUMN

Last month, I spent a good deal of time binging on Cryptic Studios' *City of Heroes*. I can't help myself, really; I suffer from this bizarre love/hate relationship with the game. I want to like it, but I always find myself becoming too annoyed to derive any satisfaction from playing.

On the off chance that you're not familiar with it, *COH* lets you play...well, a hero—the silly-looking, spandex-clad kind. The fictional Paragon City serves as the backdrop for your crime-fighting escapades, where you do pretty much the same thing you'd do in any other generic MMO: fight bad guys to level up your character like a rodent mindlessly running on a wheel.

LIVING CITY

Only one thing really makes *COH* stand out from the crowd: its environmental physics. See, in most MMOs, you might as well roll dice to determine a fight's outcome—but in *COH*, you can actually do things like knock your opponent off a ledge so he falls (or, better yet, hurl him off a 50-story building). This sort of environmental immersion rules...and it's why I can't stay away from the game.

It's too bad that the dev team doesn't seem to realize the advantage this offers. More often than not, the developers change things to make combat more like your standard dice-rolling affair. Travel powers, for instance—which let you run like lightning or leap tall buildings in a single bound—did more to enhance the fun of *COH*'s combat than anything else in the game...until the game's keepers decided to suppress their use in combat. It's bad enough that I have to rely on mass transit as I go save the city (you need to ride the train to get between zones), but when the game that used to let me actually fly now only does so when I'm not trying to stop a crime, I begin to feel annoyed. I can live with annoyance, though.

BOY BLUNDER

What I can't live with is a dysfunctional character. With my first hero, I took invisibility as one of my powers, thinking it would come in handy for slipping past villains unnoticed. Instead, it just prevented me from being able to attack. I took a cool-looking stun punch, too...and usually wound up getting sent to the hospital whenever I used it, as its long animation time left me rooted in place. After awhile, racking up experience debt was the only thing my first hero seemed good at.

That summarizes how it goes for a lot of people who give *COH* a try: making it to the teens or early twenties level-wise, realizing they broke their heroes somehow and that they lack any expedient way to fix them, growing discouraged in the face of the inexorable level treadmill, and losing interest in the game. It's not just the endless grind...it's the grind *plus* not having any way to tell the good choices from the bad before you make them, and not having an easy way to fix a mistake under those circumstances. User-friendliness: sadly, not one of the game's strong suits.

And that ultimately kills it for me. I'm a rare one; I actually come back every now and again. A lot more people would probably be playing *COH* right now if they could just have undone some innocent goof made during a character's early levels. On the plus side, nothing I'm griping about actually seems like it would be hard to fix. All it'd take is for someone at Cryptic to actually stand up and try. Where's a hero when you need one?

● **Matthew Chase**

● **Everybody's favorite villain group used to be the Fifth Column...up until the dev team decided to remove it from the game.**

● **I'm not Hugh Jackman, I swear!**

● **Twenty to one? Looks fair to me!**

A LOT MORE PEOPLE WOULD PROBABLY BE PLAYING *CITY OF HEROES* RIGHT NOW IF THEY COULD JUST HAVE UNDONE SOME INNOCENT GOOF MADE DURING THEIR CHARACTER'S EARLY LEVELS.

Matthew Chase

Matthew misses being able to slay hapless roleplayers in *Ultima Online*. Prithee, be quiet.

UPDATES

Our two cents on the latest mods and patches

GARRY'S MOD 10

Don't settle for just any old sandbox

Re-create your most humiliating Company of Heroes moments in glorious first person perspective.

PUBLISHER: **Valve** DEVELOPER: **Team Garry** GENRE: **Sandbox** AVAILABILITY: **E-tail (www.steampowered.com)** ESRB RATING: **Not Rated** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1.2GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, Internet connection, Source-based game (*Half-Life 2* or *Counter-Strike: Source* recommended)** MULTIPLAYER: **2-64 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **E-tail Download**

Breen's so misunderstood.

No wonder the Combine took Earth so easily.

Last time I ever thank George Lucas for an idea.

MOD REVIEW

***Garry's Mod* is a Valve variety show,** exhibiting not only characters and assets from the developer's prominent games but also the Source engine's ability to manipulate, use, and abuse them all. Want to see *Half-Life 2* heroine Alyx Vance mingle with *Counter-Strike*'s Leet Crew terrorists at a disco? It's doable—right down to the colored lighting. Dying to make *HL2*'s addie-minded scientist Kleiner lead an Allied tank charge across the fields of France? No problem. But why settle for your average M4 when a few mouse clicks and a little patience can turn your once-static *Day of Defeat* prop into a mobile, rocket-racked Sherman Calliope? That's the beauty of modmaker Garry Newman's sandbox: Little ideas become grand plans, and grand plans become enormously satisfying projects.

Daunting as it may seem at first glance, *GMod* is accessible enough for even the most amateurish of junkyard engineers. Its system of tools and constraints—spawned by the all-purpose tool gun and activated via your keyboard's number pad—requires only a marginal amount of fiddling before it becomes second nature. The physgun mangles, molds, and freezes materials in place long enough to add constraints, from simple welds and nails to more complicated ball sockets and pulleys. Supplement your Frankenstein with controllable thrusters, wheels, explosives, balloons, and a posable pilot/victim for good measure.

BEEN THERE, DONE THAT

But what can *GMod 10* possibly offer you, the master artisan who's been creatively manipulating Alyx—for free—since version two? Put simply: everything that matters. *GMod 10*'s recoded from the ground up, and it shows in everything from tool functionality to program stability. It's hard to stress just how vastly the interface improves on previous incarnations...and, for a game that lives or dies by its menu system, that's high praise. The new constraints—Hydraulics and Muscles, specifically—are intuitive and mappable to your numeric pad, making complex constructs with multistage movement a matter of effort rather than a pipe dream.

But the real show-stealer in *GMod 10*? Its new hoverball construction tool: Once attached to a prop, a button press sends the hoverball and anything it's saddled with sailing to a fixed altitude. Previously the realm of awkward, uncontrollable balloons, the skies of *GMod* are finally open for business.

THE PHYSICS OF FRUSTRATION

While *GMod 10* marks the most stable release yet from Team Garry, some of the same physics quirks that plagued the mod since day one remain. They're not bugs per se, but an unfortunate by-product of *GMod*'s freedom: Sometimes, props just *don't want* to stay put. For the most part, it's funny when disobedient physics objects careen around a map at breakneck speeds for no apparent reason...but when several hours of work implodes into a quivering mass of debris because you used the physgun a bit too liberally, you'll be glad that the save system works as well as it does.

Minor annoyances aside, *Garry's Mod 10* is the undeniable gold standard for the sandbox genre. With more depth than many games five times its price, it's hard to find a reason *not* to download this integral part of the Source experience. ● **Rory Manion**

VERDICT

- **Limitless replayability; $10 price tag.**
- **Physics quirkiness can be frustrating.**

8/10

GOOD

Games for Windows

THAT'S THE BEAUTY OF MODMAKER GARRY NEWMAN'S SANDBOX: LITTLE IDEAS BECOME GRAND PLANS, AND GRAND PLANS BECOME ENORMOUSLY SATISFYING PROJECTS.

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ON FILEFRONT

The latest and greatest demos and patches

Games for Windows: The Official Magazine **and FileFront.com have joined forces to bring you both the best possible PC-gaming coverage and access to the hottest game downloads—demos, mods, patches, and more. Head to GFW.FileFront.com to try these out for yourself.**

GOTHIC 3

Travel through Ardea, Reddock, and Kap Dun in this demo of the expansive, nonlinear, open-ended role-playing game.

NHL 07

This demo of EA Sports' annual hockey game allows you to play as one of three teams in a 5-minute period.

WARHAMMER: MARK OF CHAOS

Geez, how many *Warhammer* games are there? This demo lets you try three tutorials and "Will of the Gods," the first chapter of the single-player campaign.

ROBOBLITZ

Get behind the controls of a robot named Blitz (go figure), and try out three levels from this Unreal Engine 3–powered, physics-based action game.

SILVERFALL

Grim technology and feel-goody nature collide in this action-RPG. The demo grants you access to two areas of the full game and multiple quests.

THE MARK

Terrorists plan to blow up London—all that stands in their way is your ability to play an FPS. Try out the first level, or the Queen gets it.

PRISM: GUARD SHIELD (DEMO)

Try out the first two single-player missions and three multiplayer maps of this FPS cocreated by the Army National Guard and Rival Interactive.

BATTLEFIELD 2142 V1.06 (PATCH)

If your PC crashes whenever you end a Titan Mode round, this update fixes that annoying little inconvenience.

LEGO STAR WARS II V1.02

Bugs you have? User-interface issues you experience? Use the patch, Luke.

XAVENGER (SHAREWARE)

Hop in your spaceship and blast away enemies from Dimension X. The future of humanity rests in your sweaty hands!

SCARFACE: THE WORLD IS YOURS V1.00.2 (PATCH)

Say hello to my little update. The v1.00.2 patch deals with a few graphical issues and callously squashes a few bugs.

AFTER THE END (SHAREWARE)

Mutant invasion leads to the collapse of civilization on Rydon 7. Save the planetoid in this third-person 3D shooter.

COMPANY OF HEROES V1.3 (PATCH)

This update adds a new six-player map (Seine River Docks) and improves the replay feature by letting you view a match in slow or fast motion, with a minimized UI, and from any player's perspective.

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Casual Games

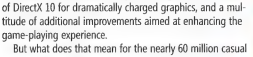
Windows Vista takes casual-games excitement to a whole new level!

Microsoft Windows Vista is revolutionizing the core PC gaming experience through its Games for Windows initiative, which includes Games Explorer integration, the advent of DirectX 10 for dramatically charged graphics, and a multitude of additional improvements aimed at enhancing the game-playing experience.

But what does that mean for the nearly 60 million casual gamers in North America who are already playing their favorite titles on MSN and Windows Live Messenger—the players who prefer the drop-in, drop-out gaming experience and spend anywhere from five minutes to several hours playing their favorite jewel-matching or chain-popping games?

With eight showcase casual games available at launch alongside the Windows Vista new-and-improved preloaded games, it may turn out that these casual players will be the first to notice the radical improvements that Windows Vista offers.

Here's an advance look at two of the games that are generating a lot of Windows Vista prerelease excitement.



Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved: Vista Edition

An enormous hit for Xbox 360 owners, Bizarre Creations' *Geometry Wars* is an arcade-style space shooting game that receives a pixel-perfect re-creation on the Windows Vista platform.

The goal of *Geometry Wars* is to stay alive by zooming around an enclosed grid that's slightly larger than your screen while shooting, dodging, and evading the geometrical shapes that replicate and pursue you. The game starts off easily enough, but evolves without levels and power-ups to become increasingly challenging and difficult.

Since its introduction, *Geometry Wars* has become one of the most popular games available due to its addictive "just one more time" progressively thrilling gameplay and wildly colorful 4th of July fireworks–style graphics, and it's never looked better than on Windows Vista!

The Vista Edition of *Geometry Wars* will support keyboard, mouse, and Xbox 360 Controller for Windows gameplay, allowing the casual player to jump right into this challenging and exciting game.

Luxor 2: Vista Edition

Luxor 2, developed by MumboJumbo, follows on the heels of one of the biggest smash hits in the casual-gaming industry and is proving to be an even bigger chain-popping phenomenon.

Once again, you'll return to ancient Egypt, the Nile, and the Great Pyramids to skitter a scarab along the bottom of your screen while blasting magical colored balls to shoot and destroy the approaching multicolored chain before it reaches the pyramids at the end of its path.

Great combo moves earn bonuses and power-ups such as Color Clouds, Fire Balls, Daggers, Scorpions, and more. The play is fast and engaging, particularly as you proceed farther into the 88 stages that the Adventure Mode in this game offers.

Luxor 2: Vista Edition is rich in color, has cool new special effects and engaging sounds, and sets a new standard in stunning graphics for casual games while incorporating game controller support and full Games Explorer integration.

More to Come

While most of the launch titles are being kept under wraps, here's what is currently known—of the eight showcase casual games available at launch, two of the titles will be exclusive to Windows Vista, with the remaining titles specially enhanced for Windows Vista.

While the full list of Windows Vista casual games has not been released, three additional titles you can expect to find at launch will be *Jewel Quest 2*, *Spinwords*, and *Bliss Island*—each designed to take full advantage of the Windows Vista gaming advances.

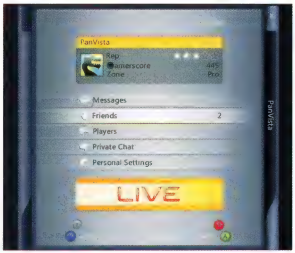
For Windows Vista Games and more, visit http://games.msn.com/en/vistagames.

Microsoft Brings LIVE Gaming to Windows Vista

Online games on Windows Vista will just get better and better

At the E3 gaming expo in May 2006, Bill Gates presented Microsoft's vision of extending the games experience of the Xbox LIVE Gaming and Entertainment Network beyond the Xbox 360. After months of intense work, Microsoft is on the cusp of delivering the first component of this vision through the retail releases of *Halo 2 for Windows Vista* and *Shadowrun*. Up to now, PC gamers have navigated seemingly endless hoops to get online and enjoy social gaming through the Internet. While some games claim to support online features, functionality is not consistent across titles and the configuration process is anything but seamless. As if getting the game up and running weren't cumbersome enough, when you add the challenges of hosting, connecting, and finding a satisfying game online, the process becomes even more time-consuming. And when you finally think you've figured it all out, you have to answer questions like:

- Which server do I join?
- Where are my friends playing?
- On which game/server can I find players with my same skill/preferences?
- Which extra software do I need to use for voice communication—and how do I convince my friends to also use it?



LIVE on Windows Vista will connect gamers to their friends, enable online chat, and keep them connected to the LIVE service while playing Windows games.

Precious gaming time is eaten up getting the game up and running, coordinating, and configuring a voice solution—that has its own set of servers—and then either setting up or finding the right game server. Even then, it might not all work for everyone who wants to play. And if there isn't a set group of friends to play with, gamers will most likely find that the crapshoot of game sessions available are poorly matched to anyone's skill set (either people will be easy pickings, or will be that kid who's on summer break and playing the game 24/7 and is unstoppable). And on the lucky chance that players do find a great game and build a community of friends who like to play that game, they can't continue to interact with the same community of friends outside of that specific title or easily find and invite them in the next new game.

Just as on Xbox 360, Windows gamers will soon be able to view their Friends List, invite friends to join in supported games, or just invite them to 1:1 chat, no matter what they're already doing on the system. (Note how a small icon indicates when a friend is logged on to the LIVE gaming network on a different platform. In this example, you are logged on from your Windows Vista machine while your friend pano360 is logged on from an Xbox 360).

Compare this to playing a game on LIVE—it's simple: Sign up, start the game, sign in, and start playing.

Xbox gamers have been enjoying this kind of ease of use for the past four years. The console experience of "it just works" without having to deal with setup has always been one of its greatest draws since the very first console let players plug it into their TV set and just hit an "on" switch. When Microsoft designed LIVE, they deeply integrated the online gaming experience with the console to ensure that it would "just work."

Bringing LIVE gaming to Windows means that Windows gamers will soon enjoy the ease of use, feature set, and rich experiences enabled by the only integrated games and entertainment network.

LIVE has been providing feature-rich, easy connectivity to console gamers for years. Windows has long had an active, vibrant online gaming community. Very soon, members of this community will also be able to enjoy such benefits as:

- **Easy to use**
  - Integrated Service—single identity, single profile, single bill
  - Reliable—everything just works
  - Easy-to-use interface optimized for Windows
- **Find a better game**
  - Quickly/easily find friends and appropriate opponents
  - Friends List, Achievements, Gamerscore, Rich Presence, Messaging
  - Integrated in-game voice
  - Secure servers, resulting in reduced cheating and griefing
- **Social experience**
  - Voice chat
  - Single Friends List across Windows and Xbox 360
  - Single identity with Gamerscore and Achievements
  - Cross-platform gaming between Xbox and Windows for supported games

LIVE users can receive voice, text, and picture messages from their friends, regardless of platform.

It's a universal service. What does that mean? That means that gamers will have a single Gamertag that exists across platforms. That means for those gamers who already play Xbox LIVE on Xbox 360, their persona, Gamerscore, and Friends List will be the same when they play a LIVE-enabled Windows game. This means they can even talk across platforms and games; for instance, you could be playing *Halo 2 for Windows Vista* online and not miss a game invite to play some co-op *Gears of War* on Xbox 360. LIVE gamers who are Gold-level members on Xbox will be Gold on Windows, and vice versa. It's one service, bridging the gap between two platforms.

Players on LIVE on Windows will be able to view the same friend details as you can on Xbox 360. Note the Windows flag icon in the Status box. This indicates the selected player is playing on Windows.

So what will LIVE on Windows look like? Those already familiar with Xbox LIVE on an Xbox 360 have a head start on understanding LIVE on Windows. From the LIVE guide screen on Windows gamers can send and receive text and voice messages to and from friends, see which friends are online, look at who they most recently played online, or have a private 1:1 chat with another member of the LIVE Gaming and Entertainment Network—regardless of whether they are on Windows Vista or Xbox 360.

In the first half of 2007, Windows gamers will be able to play online like never before, powered by the world's first and only cross-platform online gaming and entertainment network, LIVE. Get ready to enjoy gaming the way it should be.

This Means War!

Games for Windows scores another victory in THQ's *Supreme Commander*

Proving bigger really does equal better, fans of category-defining real-time-strategy classic *Total Annihilation* are in for not one but two massive surprises when spiritual successor, THQ's *Supreme Commander*, ships this season.

Not only is the epic tactical sci-fi outing—created by *Dungeon Siege II* mastermind Chris Taylor and the award-winning crew at Gas Powered Games—the first virtual outing to deliver a shockingly titanic sense of scale, it's also one of the initial titles to truly unleash the power of multi-core CPU architecture and fully integrate with revolutionary operating system Windows Vista, making it an absolute must-see, swear its creators.

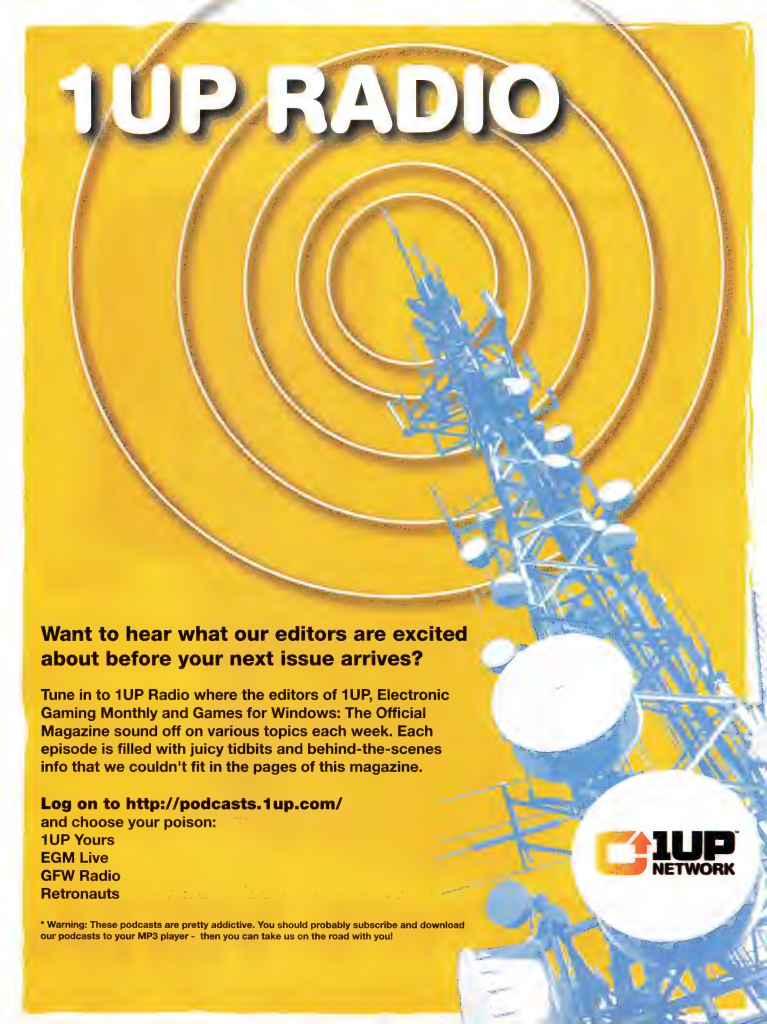
Just a few novel features the outing boasts, made possible only by the power of Microsoft's trailblazing platform? Groundbreaking support for dual-monitor display configurations at high-end visual resolutions ranging up to a jaw-dropping 1920x1200. ("Once you've experienced it, you'll never go back," insiders attest). Conformation with official Games for Windows branding requirements, which key project contributors suggest "makes playing PC games easier than ever." And, of course, the sort of unprecedented performance and stability you'd expect from a sweeping next-generation conflict, especially when multitasking, possible exclusively via Vista and DirectX 10's state-of-the-art technology.

Dubbed the "future of RTS gaming," the 37th-century interstellar conflagration pits three factions—the militaristic United Earth Federation, man-machine hybrids the Cybran Nation, and alien sympathizers the Aeon Illuminate—against one another. Employing a customizable interface and hundreds of eye-popping units from stealthy bombers to high-tech battleships, you'll help each viciously assault its age-old foes by air, land, and sea across three unique, story-driven campaigns. According to the game's designers, the goal was to take the RTS genre somewhere it's never been before—specifically, a world where strategic zoom options let you seamlessly pan from single unit close-ups to breathtaking, galaxy-level panoramic views. (The production team literally promises "the largest and most insane maps ever.")

Innovation's the watchword here, says Gas Powered Games, which hopes *Supreme Commander* will be remembered for its sheer creativity as much as its horsepower. Just a few forward-thinking extras armchair generals can check for include eight-man multiplayer connectivity (including provisions for clans, friend lists, skirmishes, team-based battles, and ranking ladders) and automated, computer-controlled helpers that provide assistance with tasks like resource build-up and micromanagement during especially heated engagements. Don't forget massive body counts, co-op options, nail-biting base construction sequences, flamboyant experimental weapons (see: the MonkeyLord, nuke-flinging Mavor, or Galactic Colossus), dynamic waypoint plotting, and an adjustable 3D camera either. Not to mention, naturally, infinite replay value, with community-friendly features like map/mission editors, downloadable extras, instant replays, and modmaking tools available right out of the box.

As Taylor and co. explain: "Serious gamers always want cutting-edge gaming platforms—that's precisely what Vista is." But remember: This is just the beginning for Games for Windows; the best is still yet to come. With dedicated Vista developers continually pushing for Games for Windows–branded titles that are easier to install, maintain and operate, it's no wonder, according to Gas Powered Games, that in the future, "PCs will rule the gaming world."

1UP RADIO



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Cruising the Vistas: Which is the right version for gamers?

WINDOWS VISTA:

REVIEW

Too Zune

Microsoft's getting into the MP3 player biz. Should they? And is this the iPod killer?

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Quad Core!

How does AMD's new quad-core FX-74 CPU fare against Intel's quad-core offering?

WINDOWS DRESSING

Microsoft's new baby, Windows Vista, has a huge competitor—one that's stable, relatively secure, installed in hundreds of millions of homes, and (ahem) works flawlessly with every piece of hardware and software currently available. Its name? Windows XP.

So why even consider buying into Vista, let alone one of the five flavors of Microsoft's next operating system? Microsoft's answers: ease of use, a frosty looking interface (*cough* OS X *cough*), a huge focus on gaming (about damn time!)—oh, and it's the only place you can find DirectX 10.

This month, with the final version* (see sidebar, right) of Vista in hand, we're going to find out if Microsoft can deliver on some of those promises. Just bear in mind that this isn't a final review of Vista—think of it instead as a late scouting report. Look for the definitive word after Vista's release—when we actually have all the finished hardware drivers to get the job done.

THE OS IS THE STAR

PROS: Microsoft needs to sell Vista to the XP masses (and attempt to win over Mac addicts) by showing off the differences. Yes, it's pretty. Ripping pages from the OS X playbook, Vista feels very holistic and visual in its approach. Get over the initial learning curve, and you'll find the top navigation system makes Windows Explorer even easier, while metatag searches locate files and folders in a snap. That's to say nothing of the focus on hardware with the Aero/3D Flip feature—it's a DirectX instance built into the core of the OS, and that means a good 3D card is key even if you have no intention of gaming. Following that logic, if every Vista PC comes armed with the required hardware, suddenly every PC is game-ready. Add to the mix DirectX 10 and the fact that the OS is always online (it can grab new drivers as needed), and it's obvious that, with Vista, Microsoft is taking gamers seriously.

CONS: In an age of third-party apps, a lot of the OS's features aren't nearly as unique as they would have been a year or two ago. You've been able to navigate through a *Tron*-like 3D rendition of your PC with Tactile 3D (tactile3d.com) for a year. Vista's neat sidebar with sticky mini-apps? Google and Yahoo offer similar apps right now for XP. Internet Explorer 7 and Media Player 11 are sweet in Vista, but both apps work in XP as well. And stability? XP is a solid platform while Vista, though in good shape now, is still shaking out some of the kinks. The real differences that stand out between Vista and XP, besides the obvious graphical sheen, won't be apparent until more DX10 games show up on the scene.

SETUP AND INSTALLATION

PROS: Before you buy anything, Microsoft's Windows Upgrade Advisor (check out the "Get Ready" section of www.windowsvista.com) sets you straight right up front. Which version of Vista will work best? Is it even worth upgrading your current rig? Remember that the longer you hold off buying a new PC, the more likely you are to get a factory-fresh install of Vista on a machine built with the new operating system in mind.

To that end, let's start talking about our experiences with three machines running varying versions of the new OS: a 1GHz jalopy with 512MB RAM and a 128MB Radeon 9800 Pro is puttering along with Home Basic; a Dell XPS 700, armed with an Intel Core 2 X6800 CPU, 3GB of RAM, and a 512MB Radeon X1950XTX, served as the main test rig for both Home Premium and Ultimate. The third system, a tricked-out Voodoo PC, is the "Microsoft preferred" system for testing Vista. [*Ed.*—Microsoft provided a Vista-test Voodoo PC to *GFW* magazine and every major technology publication. Not everybody uses the same computer, let alone a tricked-out $5,000 monster machine, so we conducted a majority of our tests on the other rigs.]

In every instance, installation operated on autopilot—no need to futz with RAID drivers on a floppy disk, no worries about keeping extra CDs handy. The setup is relatively hassle-free, even compared to that of XP. All the drivers either are on the Vista DVD or are downloaded during installation. Whether upgrading, doing a clean install, or creating a partition, it took at most 50 minutes to see Vista's Welcome Center screen staring at us. With the network configured at the touch of a button, we logged onto e-mail.

CONS: Some of you may be tempted to upgrade that current XP installation to Vista. We've done it. It works and is a painless process—but there's a hitch once you try running the OS. While it's hardly a quantifiable difference, Vista boots and operates a hair slower from an upgrade than from a clean install. At least create a Vista partition and try migrating files you need. While documents and MP3s make the move with little effort, some applications don't fare as well when vacating XP-land. It's a new OS—you didn't expect 100-percent compatibility, did you?

Now for some hardware fun: So here we are, OS installed, ready to rock—but where the hell is the sound? That's right, as of the RTM (release to manufacturing) phase, there are no drivers for Creative Labs' Sound Blaster X-Fi audio. This is only one of the most significant soundcards to come along in a while, and Vista's not supporting it out of the box? I don't care if it's Microsoft's or Creative Labs' fault—someone needs a boot in the ass. Until then, we're stuck with onboard audio and dialing out those cool EAX-filtered screams of fragged fools.

Then there's this freaky fluke: Go on—combine the unholy trinity of the XPS 700's nForce 590 motherboard, any ATI graphics card, and Windows Vista. If the graphics card isn't in the primary PCIe slot (the one farthest from the CPU), Vista will operate so slowly you'll think you've entered bullet time. God willing, Vista's retail release will plug this hole. If not, XPS 700 owners: You have been warned. >

*VISTA RTM

When final isn't *quite* final

On November 30, 2006, Microsoft officially rolled out Windows Vista RTM (release to manufacturing) at a huge event in New York City. Gold code. Done. Fin. Right?

Wrong. Microsoft may have finished the job, but many hardware vendors now need to scramble double-time to get final working drivers. Case in point: Nvidia. Right now, we have a GeForce 8800 GTX, DirectX 10–ready board sitting in a corner, teasing us until Vista-friendly drivers magically appear. That's OK, though. Vista has online updating built into the OS framework—that potentially means nobody's hunting for driver discs in the future. It also means that many of the hardware-test results we're getting right now could be invalid by the time you get your hands on Vista.

GAME ON

The pros and cons of Microsoft's new OS

THE BIG PICTURE

"What about games?" you ask? That's a huge part of the new OS, and Vista's Games folder becomes the main hub of a player's PC. From here, you'll be able to access all the parts of the OS that matter: hardware tweaking, customizing how you launch games, deleting games, parental controls, you name it. Check out the big screenshot for the dime-store tour—here's what sticks out to us:

IDIOT-PROOFING WINDOWS

PROS: You probably have a PC-curious console-gamer friend who's scared of PC games because the "minimum/required spec" part of the game box reads like Sanskrit. For him, the Windows Experience Index could remove plenty of headaches. Not only will it simplify the process by rating systems on a 1 to 5 scale, it'll clue him in as to which games will work on his computer.

Run Vista's quick system test, and it'll rate your rig in several categories: CPU, RAM, graphics, gaming graphics, and primary hard disk. If your PC scores in the middle of the road with a 3, Vista will automatically tweak game settings to optimize the performance—maybe dropping a game's resolution to 1024x768, for example. Rocking a benchmark-busting 5 means the OS automatically switches on all the anisotropic filtering bells and whistles at 1600x1200 resolution.

CONS: More n00bs could soon populate your online games. Seriously, though, this will most benefit people who are intimidated by PC games...and lazy bastards who don't want to monkey with settings. The only real problem with the WEI's rating system? Time. A PC that may rate a solid 5 right now is next year's 4. Whoever is monitoring the game requirements had better update that database regularly, because *Company of Heroes* will work great on a 1 at some point in the not-too-distant future.

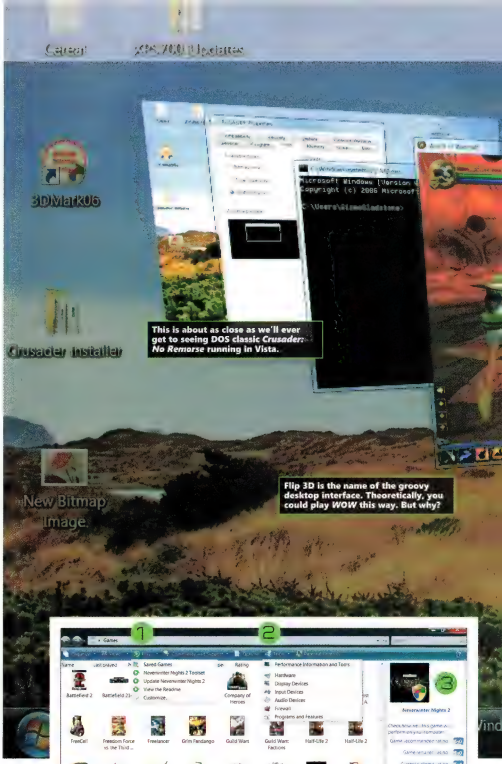
SOMEONE CALL SECURITY

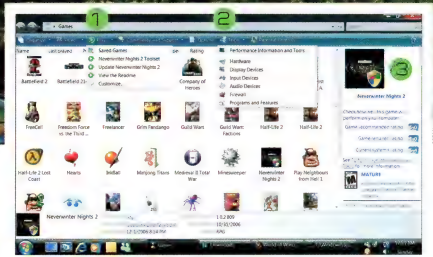
PROS: Beefed-up security in Vista's Games section prevents kids from seeing inappropriate material. You can follow the ESRB rating system to block M-rated games, for example, or specifically forbid your children from playing games after 1 a.m. that promote alcohol use. Besides, that's *your* playtime!

CONS: What's handy for blocking kids from seeing porn also keeps you from doing something as mundane as changing the desktop background without getting admin approval—and even if you are an admin, you still need to approve the event. That's exactly what we need! Another layer of red tape.

What can you do about these User Account Controls? Approve every single action you start after clicking the launch icon, or turn off the UAC feature altogether. Many will appreciate the extra levels of security not found in XP. Others will just find these measures to be a paranoid pain in the ass. But better safe than sorry, I suppose. >

PC-CURIOUS CONSOLE GAMERS WILL APPRECIATE THE WINDOWS EXPERIENCE INDEX SCORE.


Caesar
XP's 700 Updates
3DMark06
Crusader Installer
New Bitmap Image
This is about as close as we'll ever get to seeing DOS classic *Crusader: No Remorse* running in Vista.
Flip 3D is the name of the groovy desktop interface. Theoretically, you could play *WOW* this way. But why?

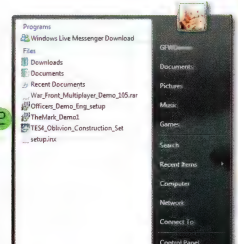


Welcome to the Games folder, your new home. How does it work? Let's use *Neverwinter Nights 2* as an example. 1) From the Play list, you can launch the game, the updater, or the mod-making toolset. You can even stack launch shortcuts. With the touch of a button it can launch the game, TeamSpeak, and XFire if you want. 2) From this drop-down, you can quickly access any hardware or software settings that could affect performance. 3) Here's a purty picture of the game along with its Windows Experience Index and rating.

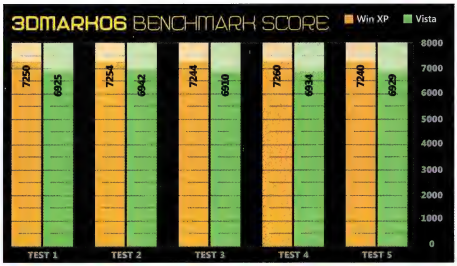
Our art team remembers a simpler time when all these Vista "Gadgets" were called "Widgets"—in Mac OS X.

In order for something to be Vista-ready and earn the coveted "Games for Windows" tag, it must support the following things: widescreen resolutions, 64-bit processors, and multicore/multithreading CPUs.

Despite additional compatibility tabs and dreams of running DOS apps, the Holy Grail still eludes us. You still cannot play *Crusader: No Remorse*. What kind of unholy DOS demon coded that game, anyhow? Oh, right, Tony Zurovec.



Where the hell did I download all those demos to on the PC? 1) Hit the start circle to do a quick search for downloads. 2) I found my files by the time I typed "Do."



GAME PERFORMANCE

Since our bare-bones machine wasn't powerful enough to run a majority of our tests (or test games), we're relying on the XPS 700 to show how well Vista runs. Here's what's inside the beast: **CPU:** Intel Core 2 X6800; **Memory:** 3GB DDR2-667 RAM; **GPU:** ATI Radeon X1950 XTX; **Primary Hard Disk:** 10,000-rpm Western Digital Raptor WD740GD; **Audio:** X-Fi Fatal1ty (well, if the drivers worked); **Optical drive:** Sony DVD-ROM DDU1615.

To test Vista's performance, we ran a 3DMark06 benchmark five times. Without final release drivers, take any of the results listed in the chart above with a grain of salt, of course—but almost every game from *Half-Life 2* to *World of WarCraft* worked flawlessly within Vista. That's at least a small victory for compatibility. Games using OpenGL, not-so-high-profile freeware games, and the ever-puzzling *Dark Messiah of Might and Magic*, however? Well, we'll get back to you once they stop crashing or stable OpenGL drivers come along—whichever comes first. Despite an "Unapproved Driver" warning in 3DMark06, we press on.

> SEE A PATTERN HERE? VISTA RUNS DX9 APPLICATIONS ABOUT FIVE PERCENT SLOWER THAN WINDOWS XP DOES.

See a pattern in the chart above? Vista runs DirectX 9 applications about five percent slower than Windows XP does. At first, we were just chalking this up to an early driver issue. One tipster, however, told us that Microsoft always knew that Vista wouldn't be able to run DirectX 9 games as fast—originally anticipating a performance drop of 10 to 15 percent. I guess maintaining system stability doesn't come free.

What does Microsoft have to say on the subject? Grand pooh-bah (Group Manager for Windows Graphics and Gaming Technologies) Chris Donahue says, "The graphics drivers are not up to full speed yet and are most likely not optimized." Recalling the early days of Windows XP, Donahue adds, "There were tons of people saying not to upgrade from Win9x since its performance was better—but, by the time hardware vendors got their drivers tuned, XP ran many games faster." However, he points out that Vista has an entirely new driver model and the desktop now runs a DirectX instance. Whatever the case, we're holding off on publishing full test results until our full review.

Assuming drivers iron out most of the issues we've run into with these initial tests, Vista still stands up as a significant advance for Windows. At least the glass remains half-full until the retail copy and final drivers release in late January. Despite a couple of boneheaded omissions (DOSBox? X-Fi drivers from the get-go?), Vista is off to a good start. For now, the only question left is, "Which of the five versions of Vista is right for us gamers?"

FIVE?!?!

Yeah, five versions of an OS can sound a little confusing, but it's not as though you're looking for an enterprise solution. So we're gonna make this easy. Two versions of Vista are business-centric (Business and Enterprise), so that knocks 'em right off the top. Starting from the bottom of the lineup is **Vista Home Basic** ($200 full; $100 upgrade from XP). Basic is just that—constructed for gimpy machines that maybe the Flintstones used to calculate a brontosaurus' miles-per-gallon rating. Lacking the slick 3D interface that really sells the new OS, Vista Home Basic requires an 800MHz processor and 512MB RAM. If you're reading this, you probably scrapped that system about two years ago, or you're stubbornly sticking to hex-based war games and don't give a damn. The only reason for buying Basic is to dip your foot into the Vista pool and maybe upgrade later (you can unlock Ultimate if you want it). Basic, though, doesn't really show what the OS has to offer over XP. Don't buy it.

This leaves you with the two realistic options: **Vista Home Premium** ($240 full; $160 upgrade from XP) and **Vista Ultimate** ($400 full; $260 upgrade from XP). Either one is a lot of money, especially considering you can buy a Nintendo Wii for just 10 bucks more than the price of a full Vista Premium edition. So is either worth the cash? That depends on the features you're looking for, but the short version is this: Think of Home Premium as the refined version of what you're already seeing on Media Center PCs. If you care even a little about Media Center, you'll be happy to know it got a great overhaul. Those not already familiar will appreciate the built-in Xbox 360 extender support. That means a thin-client device is awaiting your PC's video and audio in the living room. **Vista Ultimate**? Let's just call this what it really is: XP Professional Pimp Edition. It loops in all the features of Vista's business editions (even more emphasis on reliability with disk image backup, full drive data encryption, and advanced networking functionality) while adding some nebulous "Ultimate Extras." Don't ask. We don't know what those extras are just yet, either. Maybe the ability to run every DOS game ever made? Hey, we can dream. • **Darren Gladstone**

A 30-SECOND HISTORY OF WINDOWS

Take a quick look back at spirits of OS past (except MS Bob—that was just a bad dream): Windows 95 brought MS-DOS users kicking and screaming into the 32-bit era. With it came countless blue screens of death. Windows 98 opened up the possibilities of USB devices and AGP cards. Windows XP shed its DOS-y roots and switched to a more stable NT/2000 base. XP begat several children—XP Home, XP Professional, Media Center—effectively setting the stage for Vista's tiered OS.

HARD NEWS

The bleeding edge of tech

TOO ZUNE

PRODUCT: **Zune MP3 Player** MANUFACTURER: **Microsoft**
PRICE: **$250** URL: **www.zune.net**

REVIEW

Go on, say it with me—"Zooooon!" Microsoft's much-hyped "iPod killer" has it all. Slick-looking hardware with a gorgeous screen, mind-bogglingly oblique ads crafted to make you feel uncool if you don't have one, a new iTunes-like service that rocks a modified Media Player 11—the works.

Sharing a similar form factor to Creative's awesome Zen Vision: M, Zune handles the major tasks one expects of an MP3 player (music, duh!) and throws in a 320x240-resolution, 3-inch display for watching video. The big-deal feature—viral A/V—is sweet as hell. Switch on the battery-killing Wi-Fi transmitter, and you can share your music and videos with other Zune owners. This is the future of portable music.

But what sounds good on paper has a single hole so big you could drive a truck through it. The 30GB Zune idiotically doesn't support Microsoft's own big video initiatives. It won't transcode or play video files created in Media Center (or Vista). What an amazing waste of an amazing screen! The Zune also makes people hack the device to make it viewable as a hard drive. While we're at it, podcast support in the software wouldn't suck, either—it's a pretty damn popular phenomenon, whether it's Apple's or not.

All it'll take is a firmware/software update to battle these beefs (more codec support!). Microsoft just rushed this out the door too Zune. Sorry. ● **Darren Gladstone**

● **It looks cool and has a serviceable interface, but some software choices here are just plain dumb.**

VERDICT

- **Wi-Fi file sharing—smart!**
- **But where's the full video support?**

5/10 AVERAGE

Games for Windows

4X4 HAMMERED

PRODUCT: **Quad FX-74 CPU** MANUFACTURER: **AMD**
PRICE: **$1,000 (sold as two CPUs)** URL: **www.amd.com**

REVIEW

Intel, you can breathe easy for a minute. AMD's new quad-core CPU, the Quad FX-74 (code-named "4x4") doesn't stack up. You need at least a 600W power supply—and some headphones—to get the new processors running up to speed. Oh, sure, it's a great deal, selling two CPUs for $1,000 (don't bother asking for just one, however; they sell in pairs), but the results say it all.

In the battle of the quad cores, Intel's 2.66GHz Core 2 Extreme QX6700 beats two 2GHz AMD FX-74s in multiple tests. Unfortunately, the CPUs got to us at the last minute and we ran out of room here. Number-hungry for the full analysis? It's all on ExtremeTech.com. ● **Loyd Case**

BY THE NUMBERS

	Intel Core 2 Extreme QX6700	AMD Quad FX-74
3DMark06 CPU test score	4064	3749
3DMark06 Individual CPU test score	1.899	1.775
Company of Heroes	41.8	46.3
Half-Life 2	101.6	99
Call of Duty 2	44.3	43.2
F.E.A.R.	49	49

Note: All tests except 3DMark06 CPU test were measured in frames per second and conducted at high detail turned on.

VERDICT

- **Ready for the quad-core future.**
- **Two CPUs not as powerful as one quad-core Intel CPU.**

5/10 AVERAGE

Games for Windows

[GEEKED AT BIRTH.]

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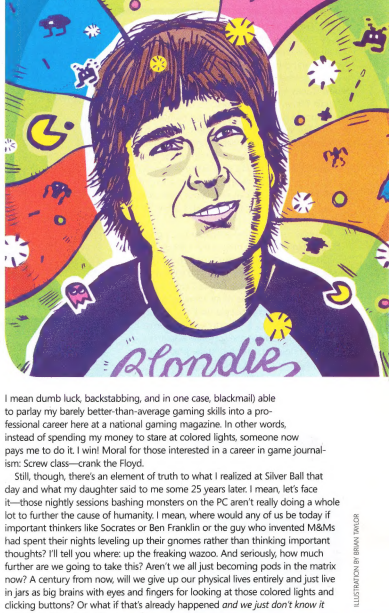
COLUMN



"Dad, do you know what you spend most of your life doing?"

My 12-year-old daughter had just walked into the room, holding a Kelly Clarkson CD. I was behind my PC, making my way through Act 3 of *Titan Quest*. Accompanying snack food: a bowl of Cap'n Crunch and an Anchor Steam.

"Hmmmm, I don't know," I said, as my level 32 Conqueror continued to pound on a group of Tigermen. "Work hard to make sure you have food, clothing, and a place to sleep?"

"Sheeyah. Right. No, Dad. You spend your life staring at colored lights and clicking a button."

I stopped clicking.

"Anyway, good luck with those Tigermen," she said, flashing me the "loser" sign on her way out.

Let me just say, for the record, that it's hard enough to balance one's potion-quaffing and monster-bashing without having one's very own offspring reduce your entire existence to such a pathetic and uncomfortably accurate bottom line. But what my smarty-pants, now-grounded-for-life kid didn't realize, in any event, was that she wasn't telling me anything I hadn't heard before. I've been hearing the "games are a waste of time" argument since like the second I popped out of the womb. OK, maybe not the first second, because that would've been kind of weird, and I wouldn't have understood it anyway—nor really been in any mood to hear it, given that I was one second old, crying, and covered in mucus. But I'm sure it was pretty soon after.

Actually, kids, I can trace my own first existential crisis over my gaming habit to an exact place and time while I was a student at UC Berkeley many years ago. Place: The Silver Ball Arcade on Durant Avenue. Time: 4:00 p.m. on a rainy Wednesday, when I was supposed to be in my 19th-Century American Lit class. Mental state: Not sober, for reasons not publishable in a family magazine. However, please remember, before judging me, that this was the 1970s, and there was a lot of "experimentation" going on—plus some really good Pink Floyd albums to listen to. Expanding your mind was kind of like going to Pilates classes now, minus the exertion.

Anyway, there I was, at Silver Ball, hanging with my friends, quarters piled up on the *Space Invaders* machine—when suddenly it hit me, like a garbage bag full of hammers right in the head: I was totally wasting my time. All around me were productive people doing productive things. I was attending one of the finest academic institutions in the world—brilliant minds, rich libraries ripe for the picking. And here I was at an arcade, staring at colored lights and pressing a button. I was not a useful member of society! I was a drooling monkey! Obviously, something had to be done. I had to leave this arcade. But to where? The Peace Corps. A farm. Ghana. Somewhere with a purpose. Somewhere in touch with the land. Somewhere where people were working together to help other people. Sadly, by the time I had gotten back to my dorm, I was distracted by a seriously intense craving for cheese pizza—and then, after that, someone down the hall put on *Dark Side of the Moon* really loud, so I totally had to hang out there. Thus ended my brief affair with altruism.

In any event, it all worked out for the best. Sure, my grades suffered. Sure, I kind of squandered my chance of getting into a good grad school and becoming a Supreme Court justice or brain surgeon all because of videogames. And, sure, despite that, I couldn't even get the high score on *Space Invaders*, thus rendering all my effort (and quarters) even more meaningless. The ironic net result, and the great triumph of yours truly, is that I was somehow (and by "somehow" I mean dumb luck, backstabbing, and in one case, blackmail) able to parlay my barely better-than-average gaming skills into a professional career here at a national gaming magazine. In other words, instead of spending my money to stare at colored lights, someone now pays me to do it. I win! Moral for those interested in a career in game journalism: Screw class—crank the Floyd.

Still, though, there's an element of truth to what I realized at Silver Ball that day and what my daughter said to me some 25 years later. I mean, let's face it—those nightly sessions bashing monsters on the PC aren't really doing a whole lot to further the cause of humanity. I mean, where would any of us be today if important thinkers like Socrates or Ben Franklin or the guy who invented M&Ms had spent their nights leveling up their gnomes rather than thinking important thoughts? I'll tell you where: up the freaking wazoo. And seriously, how much further are we going to take this? Aren't we all just becoming pods in the matrix now? A century from now, will we give up our physical lives entirely and just live in jars as big brains with eyes and fingers for looking at those colored lights and clicking buttons? Or what if that's already happened *and we just don't know it yet?* Dude. Great. Now I'm freaked out again. There's only one possible solution. Yeah, that's right.

It's time for pizza.

Jeff Green

ILLUSTRATION BY BRIAN TAYLOR

Jeff Green

What Jeff doesn't realize is that the guy who got the high score on that *Space Invaders* machine was Bill Gates. Harsh. his buzz at jeff_green@ziffdavis.com.

Games for Windows: The Official Magazine (ISSN 1933-6160) is published monthly by Ziff Davis Media, Inc. 28 East 28th Street, New York, NY 10016. Periodicals Postage Paid at New York, NY 10016 and additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Send address changes to *Games for Windows: The Official Magazine*, PO. Box 57167, Boulder, CO 80322-7167. Canadian GST registration number is 865286033. Publication Mail Agreement No.40009221. Return Undeliverable Canadian Addresses to PO. Box 503, RPO West Beaver Creek, Richmond Hill, ON L4B 4R6. Printed in the U.S.A.

ASUS Recommends Microsoft® Windows® XP

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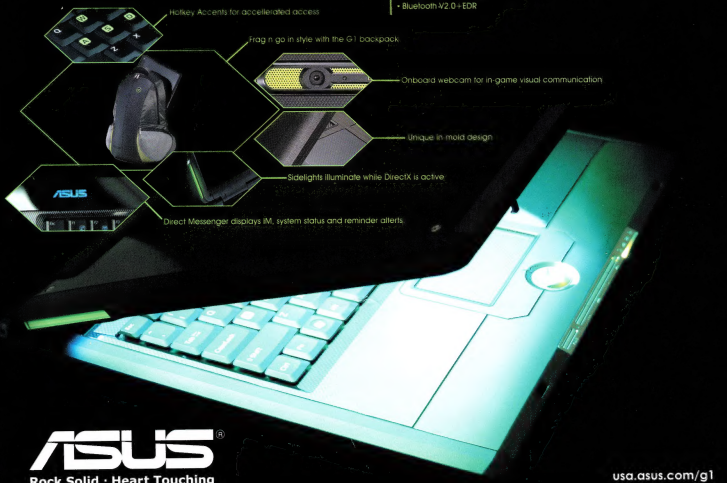
- Built-in 1.3 Megapixel webcam
- ASUS Direct Messenger
- Bluetooth V2.0+EDR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